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**The Dissertation Committee for Andrew Raymond Campbell Certifies that this is  
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**BOUND TOGETHER:  
BEING-WITH GAY AND LESBIAN LEATHER COMMUNITIES  
AND VISUAL CULTURES, 1966-1984**

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BEING-WITH GAY AND LESBIAN LEATHER COMMUNITIES  
AND VISUAL CULTURES, 1966-1984**

**by**

**Andrew Raymond Campbell, B.A.; M.A.**

**Dissertation**

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## **Dedication**

For feminists and queers; empowerment in misbehaving.



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## Preface: Notes on Terminology

There are many ways to linguistically name the representations of sex discussed in *Bound Together*. I have chosen “leather” as the term under which I organize the heterogeneous and multitudinous practices discussed herein, practices that sometimes incorporate sadomasochism, power play, bondage, fisting, discipline, humiliation, flagging, flogging, fucking and so much more. To wit “leather” also encompasses kissing, hugging, flirting, talking and other practices that are often seen as sexually benign. Within contemporary BDSM communities these seemingly benign activities are positioned as “vanilla,” but these less-sensationalistic corporeal acts become, in fact, part of leather sexualities when coupled with practices usually associated with leather, or embodied by a self-identified leatherperson.<sup>1</sup>

A kiss means something different when it comes before, during or after a consensual beating. And as with all sex, it matters who is doing what with whom, and what they *make it mean together*.

The main reason I consistently use leather, instead of another term, is its broad applicability and elasticity; as Gayle Rubin has aptly noted, many fetishes are housed under the umbrella of “leather.”<sup>2</sup> The term enjoyed wide dissemination during the period which is the main focus of this dissertation, roughly 1966-1984. *Drummer* magazine, for example, one of the central archives of information I mine regarding leather communities in the 1970s and 1980s, was organized around a “Leather Fraternity.” The masthead of

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<sup>1</sup> I often conjunct leather with the word that follows it to intimate the close identification in which leather is concatenated with people, acts, and communities.

<sup>2</sup> Gayle Rubin, “The Valley of the Kings: Leathermen in San Francisco, 1960-1990” (dissertation, University of Michigan, 1994), 37.

the magazine reads, “The one publication dedicated to the leather lifestyle for guys.” The International Mr. Leather contest, which got its start in the late 70s, indexes the term in its very title. I could pile on more examples. I also use leather as an organizing term because it is used by contemporary institutions which display and preserve the visual and material stuff that historical leather communities produced. I am thinking mostly of The Leather Archives & Museum, another archive I accessed during the course of research. But the term also applies to contemporary socio-political (and pansexual) organizations such as the National Leather Association as well.

Of course, leather was not the only term used in the 1970s. S&M, SM, and sadomasochism were prevalent too. But these terms have their roots in a classificatory system that sought to pathologize sexual acts of dominance and submission. As many historians of sexual communities and cultures have rehearsed before, the terms Sadism and Masochism are the brainchild of Austro-German sexologist Richard von Krafft-Ebing who first used them in his 1886 aggregation of case-studies, *Psychopathia Sexualis*.<sup>3</sup> In grouping together what he perceived to be like/similar pathologies, Krafft-Ebing was engaged in the creation of new taxonomic categories. Krafft-Ebing named two related but different desires, the desire to cause “pain” and “force” or to be willfully subjected to them, name-checking authors he felt exemplified those desires in their literary work – the Marquis de Sade and Leopold von Sacher-Masoch. But Krafft-Ebing’s formulations became, and much to the dismay of leatherfolks and non-leatherfolks,

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<sup>3</sup> Richard von Krafft-Ebing, *Psychopathia Sexualis* (Bloat Books, 1999).

remain orthodoxy within contemporary mental health diagnostic practice. Indeed, the current DSM-IV, lists “sexual sadism” and “sexual masochism” as paraphilias.<sup>4</sup>

As a self-identified queer person, who sometimes also identifies as a faggot, I strongly believe in and live by the stratagem of appropriating and retooling terms that are derisory, pathologizing, and hateful as a tactic for finding empowerment. That such terms index a complicated history is part of their particular power. I am reminded of this when, in front of a classroom of 100 or so students, I first utter the word “queer” each semester. The response is subtle, but unique: a slight sucking in of breath through gritted teeth, evidence enough of the stigma that a term like “queer” continues to carry. Others within leather communities of the 1970s and 1980s believed that SM, S&M, or sadomasochism should be used for the very reasons I apply a term like “queer” to myself. Such voices are valid as well. In a book review of Geoff Mains’ seminal leather text *Urban Aborigines*, published in *DungeonMaster*, the reviewer excoriates “Mains’ choice of ‘leather’ over ‘S&M’”, as it “softens what he’s writing about. ‘I’m into leather’ could be easily viewed as a statement of a harmless quirk (Woody Allen got a joke out of that very quote in *Annie Hall*); ‘I’m into S&M’ is a statement of radical politics.”<sup>5</sup>

That particular review was published in 1984, and now terminology in the contemporary leather landscape is vastly different, and I would refer any reader to Margot Weiss’ “Note on Terminology” that opens her book *Techniques of Pleasure: BDSM and the Circuits of Sexuality*. The thoroughness with which she traces the lineages of a variety of contested terms helped to clarify for me the very one I have chosen to

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<sup>4</sup> American Psychological Association, *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders*. 4th ed. (Washington, D.C.: American Psychological Association, 1994).

<sup>5</sup> T.R. Witomski, review of *Urban Aborigines*, Geoff Mains. *DungeonMaster*, no. 26 (Aug. 1984): 9.

privilege in this study. Weiss, it should be noted, uses BDSM, a term that is of “relatively recent (and, many suggest, Internet) coinage.”<sup>6</sup> But then her book is focused more on contemporary, pansexual communities.

It may also be useful here to briefly set up some of the language I use to describe sex, language that is largely taken directly out of the source material I’m working with. Thus, I do not always affect a researcher’s “objectivity” and cloak my discussions of sex in polite euphemism, or clinical/academic language. I use the word “fuck” liberally. I am utterly aware that this word comes with as much cultural baggage as does more polite phrasing, such as “making love.” So let me be clear as to its meaning herein. To some, fucking may imply *only* penetrative sex – an implication I refuse. To others, it may come to monolithically mean uncaring, unsympathetic or anonymous sex – another association I refuse. Fucking encompasses these things and more. I hope to stretch a term like “fuck,” as an integrative part in my search to stretch the terms under which histories of communities are written, so that it becomes an umbrella term (not unlike “leather”), incorporating many kinds of affective sexual relationships. But talking about fucking has its downsides. Once, while presenting some of the material in this dissertation, a leatherman approached me after my talk and told me, “You know, we make love too.” His point is not left unconsidered, and I hope that he finds I’ve done justice to a myriad of sex practices in leather communities – as filtered through the preferred term of “fucking.”

Finally, I concentrate on “gay” and “lesbian” leatherfolks, which is to say those people who most often had contacts with same or similar-gendered people. This may

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<sup>6</sup> Margot Weiss, *Techniques of Pleasure: BDSM and the Circuits of Sexuality* (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2011), vii.



seem odd given that leather sexuality, in a deep way, questions the very foundations of the aligning/coalitional categories of gay and lesbian. As Pat Califia put it, “Most of my partners are women, but gender is not my boundary [...] If I had a choice between being shipwrecked on a desert island with a vanilla lesbian and a hot male masochist, I’d pick the boy.”<sup>7</sup> Many gay and lesbian leatherfolks played with (i.e. fucked) people of the opposite gender, and also chose to align themselves with gay or lesbian identities. In writing a history of gay and lesbian leatherfolks I do so under the assumption of such expanded definitions of identity –as a process of self-naming, affiliation, and affinity.

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<sup>7</sup> Pat Califia, “A Secret Side of Lesbian Sexuality,” *The Advocate*, no. 283 (Dec. 27, 1979).

**Abstract**  
**BOUND TOGETHER:**  
**BEING-WITH GAY AND LESBIAN LEATHER COMMUNITIES**  
**AND VISUAL CULTURES, 1966-1984**

Andrew Raymond Campbell, Ph.D.  
The University of Texas at Austin, 2012

Supervisor: Ann Reynolds

*Bound Together* elucidates how gay and lesbian leather communities, in the years between 1966 and 1984, contested and expanded fungible notions of sex, community, and history, mostly through material and visual cultural systems: dress codes such as the hanky code, architectural spaces (bars, bathhouses, private clubs), garments, posters, advertisements, newsletters, films, and performances. In examining visual and material cultures, procedures of archival research, as well as the physical states of key archives associated with historic gay and lesbian leather communities, this dissertation opens out a discussion of a set of visual documents and terms rarely considered within the discipline of art history, or academia at large.

Through rigorous rhetorical experimentation *Bound Together* seeks to propose new ways of writing histories. Long and short chapters are interpolated, telescoping between historical leather communities and key works of contemporary art which reformat 1970s documents and visual sources. Jean Luc-Nancy's conception of "being-with," a state of coterminous existence that lies at the foundation of being and subjecthood, provides an ideal framework for coming to terms with the challenges of

writing leather histories. Nancy's notion is one that privileges mutual and relational difference. The structure of *Bound Together* works similarly, building a set of differential modes of viewing, analyzing and writing. In this way I wish to, in the words of Tilottama Rajan, use "history as the condition for an internal distancing and for self-reflection on what we do," and to furthermore present alternatives to a discipline's often "routinized, even commodified [...] repeatable techniques."<sup>8</sup>

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<sup>8</sup> Tilottama Rajan, "Introduction: Imagining History," *Imagining History*, special issue of *PMLA* 118, no. 3 (May 2003): 428.

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*“What do historians fabricate when they become writers?  
Their very discourse ought to betray what they are doing.”*  
Michel de Certeau, *The Writing of History* (88)

*“Cultural analysis is intrinsically incomplete. And, worse than that,  
the more deeply it goes the less complete it is.”*  
Clifford Geertz, *The Interpretation of Cultures* (29)

*“It may sound obvious, but what I mean is: sex is sex. What I don’t mean is sex is sea  
birds eating the entrails of live turtles. Of course, you could consider that was sex by  
construing it as a sadistic metaphor. But then, you see, then it would not be horrid, it  
would be yummy.”*  
Parker Tyler, *Screening the Sexes* (311)

## Chapter 1: Bound Together

A group of young men, most of whom sport dollops of whorled hair, gather around a leatherman – the black leather jacket and biker cap are fairly unambiguous markers – awe-struck and turned on by the leatherman’s erect and ejaculating cock [fig. 1.2]. This is a 1967 drawing by Tom of Finland (née Touko Laaksonen). One onlooker, clad in jeans and a white t-shirt, grabs the leatherman’s penis with both of his hands, each hand only encircling half its engorged girth. The cock itself is at the center of the composition, and all other figures (even the man to whom the member belongs) are centrifugally ordered around it. Its thickness is roughly comparable to each man’s neck. No one looks at the leatherman’s face directly, all eyes are agog at the giant cock. Smiles abound, and one figure, the only man with a buzzed military-style haircut, opens his mouth; positioned lowest in the composition, a droplet of ejaculate is midway on its parabolic trajectory towards his mouth. Stoicly ecstatic, the leatherman’s eyes are closed and hidden mostly in shadow, his brow slightly furrowed. He does not visibly show the same eagerness as his playmates, even though he is indeed the sole figure coming.

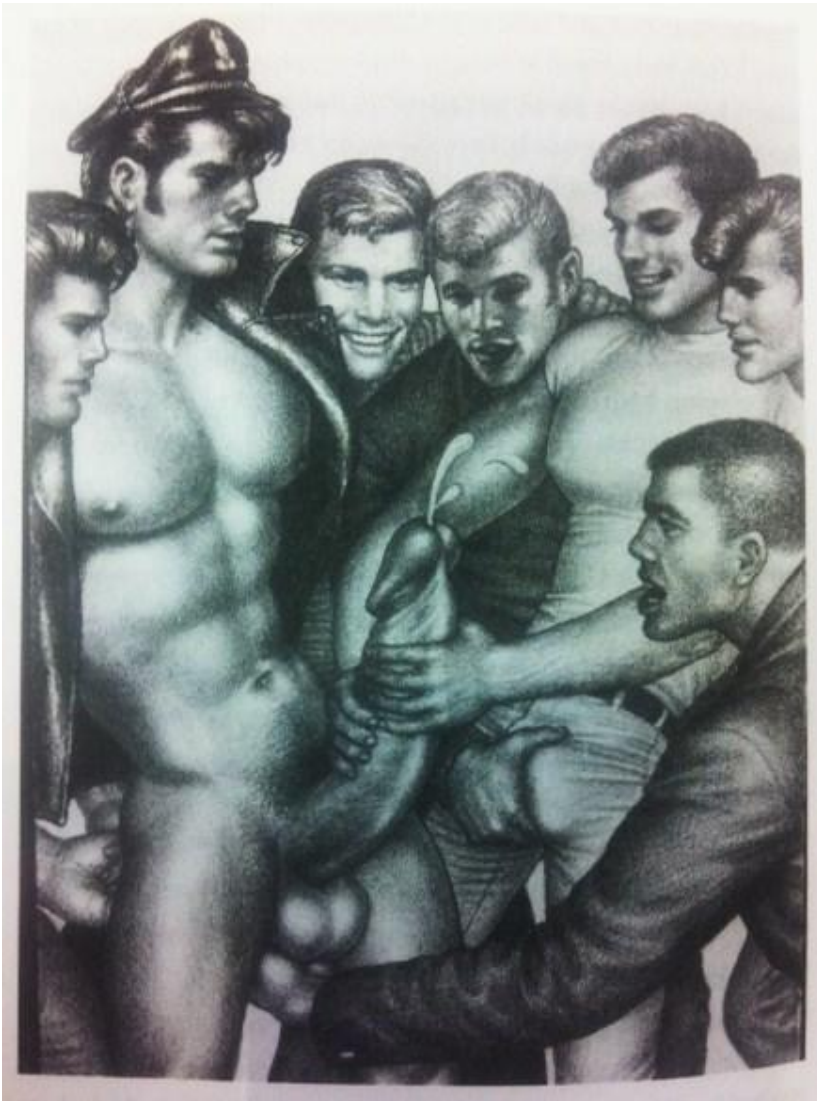


Figure 1.1: Tom of Finland, *Untitled*, 1967.

It is true that this drawing is a hyperbolic depiction of a literal phallocentrism – there's a giant dick in the middle of the composition! And it's tempting to read out the centrality of the phallus not only in the sexual organizational schema of this particular



drawing, but also in Tom of Finland's entire oeuvre and then, perhaps more ambitiously, the centrality of Tom of Finland to gay male leather visual culture.<sup>9</sup>

Yet beyond the erotics of the erect cock, which are difficult to deny, in looking more carefully at the 1967 drawing there also appear a trio of hands – whose? It's unclear – that reach towards the leatherman's ass, stimulating and penetrating him from behind. This reacharound, a secret penetration, is the action that undergirds and enables the getting off. Thus an image that could initially be read as a scene of cock worship, wherein the leatherman takes the position of top, can be wryly reformatted as a gangbang where the leatherman is the bottom. Such a reading demands that we acknowledge and make sense of what is hinted at and unseen. This is to say that the erotics of sex, and particularly group sex here, exist as much in what is not directly depicted as what is, even in the most seemingly obvious organizational schema. And so there is a place for subtlety, for hinting, hiding and re-organizing.

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<sup>9</sup> Tom of Finland spoke of his propensity towards exaggeration this way: "...many people have told me not to exaggerate so much and I have tried to go back to drawing more normal figures but I noticed when I tried to do this there was no reason to draw. Today the photography is so good and the bodies of the models are so fine, I don't find a reason to duplicate that or compete with that. I deal with fantasies, directing attention to certain areas of the body; but sometimes I feel that I exaggerate too much." Robert Opel, "Interview: Tom of Finland," *Drummer* 3, no. 22 (1978): 91. Another artist often identified with gay male leather communities is Robert Mapplethorpe. I have chosen not to focus on Robert Mapplethorpe here as a leather ur-figure, even though he is certainly discussed within the discipline of art history. In truth, leather imagery was only a part of his artistic/commercial output, whereas Tom of Finland is solely recognized for his erotic work. There are quite a few art historians and academics who have tackled Robert Mapplethorpe's depiction of leathersex, and identification within leather communities. For further discussions see: Richard Meyer, *Outlaw Representation: Censorship and Homosexuality in Twentieth-Century American Art* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2002); Jack Fritscher, *Mapplethorpe: Assault with a Deadly Camera* (Mamaronek, NY: Hastings House, 1994); Paul Morrison, "Coffee Table Sex: Robert Mapplethorpe and the Sadomasochism of Everyday Life," *Genders* 1, no. 1 (Fall 1991); and Patricia Morrisroe, *Mapplethorpe: A Biography* (New York: Random House, 1995).

One way we might position Tom of Finland's drawing is to attempt to reconstruct the various climates in which it was seen, or not seen. Although the 1967 drawing described above was completed four years after the widespread easement throughout Scandinavia of laws restricting the depiction of sexually graphic material, such liberal policies didn't extend into Laaksonen's native Finland.<sup>10</sup> This meant that Tom of Finland's work was much more easily distributed in neighboring countries such as Sweden, Denmark, and strangely, in the United States.<sup>11</sup> Juridical decisions, in particular, greatly affected the ways in which Tom of Finland's drawings and reproductions were disseminated in the United States, and more broadly, the ways these decisions played a part in producing various kinds of sexualities.<sup>12</sup>

Because the focus of my dissertation is primarily gay and lesbian leather communities within the United States, I want to break here to briefly review the shifting status of obscene/pornographic material in a series of revisionary decisions made by the US Supreme Court between the late 50s and early 70s. It is worth tracing these decisions, because in many ways, they mark out the boundaries for the sale and distribution of materials created by leatherfolks in the 1960s and 1970s.

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<sup>10</sup> In answer to the question whether or not his work was seen/reproduced in Finland, Tom of Finland responded, "No, pornography is illegal and the images I create are considered to be pornographic." Opel (1978), 91.

<sup>11</sup> Opel (1978), 91.

<sup>12</sup> This is not a new argument, and certainly builds on the territory already covered by Richard Meyer in his work on Robert Mapplethorpe in *Outlaw Representation*. Meyer examines, for example, a photo-collage, that obscures the genitals of a nude male figure – this censorship becomes, in Meyer's argument, the gasoline for desire. Truly this is a reformatting of the argument Michel Foucault makes in *The History of Sexuality Vol. 1*, in which traditional understandings of Victorian sexual repression are turned on their head as Foucault argues that such repressive regimes were actually responsible, paradoxically, for a flowering of new sexual practices and technologies. Michel Foucault, *The History of Sexuality Vol. 1: An Introduction*, trans. Robert Hurley (New York: Vintage, 1990).

In many of these decisions the discussion of what was obscene or pornographic depended on an unelaborated or ambiguous definition of community. Much of how homosexual visual material was distributed not only hinged on whether the *content* itself was deemed obscene but also by whom – which “community” held the stakes in making and enforcing such definitions. The Roth decision in 1957 declared that material could be considered “obscene” and thus banned only if the “dominant theme taken *as a whole* appeals to the prurient interest” of the “average person, applying *contemporary community standards*...”<sup>13</sup> The court, applying a “contemporary community standard” left unelaborated, found the material under question, literary and photographic erotica featuring nude women, obscene and ruled that such material could not be sent via mail. The “average person,” phantasmic in their average-ness, we might guess is the primary constituent of a “contemporary community.” Under such nebulous definitions many erotic (both hetero and homoerotic) images could only be sold under the premise that they were, in fact, something else. For homosexual men, erotic images were placed within the context of magazines for bodybuilding and “physical culture” enthusiasts.<sup>14</sup> It

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<sup>13</sup> Roth v. United States. No. 582, Supreme Court of the US. June 24, 1957. Majority opinion authored by William J. Brennan, Jr., emphasis mine. The concentration on the work as a whole instead of isolated passages was a notable reversal from the Hicklin test/standard adopted from a prior English legal case. If Roth v. The United States did anything to reduce the reach of censorship it was this: to disallow a work to be judged by an isolated part/passage. Because Brennan’s decision didn’t define what was obscene, beyond a non-specific test quoted above – definitions of community and obscenity are bound up with one another in an ambiguous way.

<sup>14</sup> F. Valentine Hooven (III), *Beefcake: The Muscle Magazines of America, 1950-1970* (Cologne, Germany: Taschen, 2002). Los Angelino Bob Mizer began the Athletic Model Guild in 1945 and began publishing *Physique Pictorial* in 1950. Perhaps more germane to discussing leather cultures and communities were the efforts of Chuck Renslow and Dom (Etienne) Orejudos, who began Kris Studio in 1950 in Chicago. This was the first of many joint efforts for the pair – including bars such as The Gold Coast, The Chicago Eagle and bathhouses such as Man’s Country. They published several magazines, keeping a healthy mail-order photography business alive. Their efforts were followed by those of Lou Thomas and Jim French’s Colt Studio, which was founded in 1967 but disbanded in 1971, at which point Lou Thomas began (with Bob Lewis) Target Studio. Target was one of the regular photographic contributors to *Drummer*, as well as its own publisher of artist’s editions and books. Athletic Model Guild, Kris Studios, Colt Studio, Target Studios – most were athletic/bodybuilding photographic studios that, due to an easement of censorship law, eventually moved into pornographic imagery.

was in one of these athletic magazines that Tom of Finland's work was first introduced to American audiences, specifically the cover of the Spring 1957 issue of *Physique Pictorial* [fig. 1.2].<sup>15</sup> In it, two loggers happily navigate downriver on large, cut wooden logs, their spears crossing squarely above the crotch of the more distant figure. This subtle "X", hiding in plain sight, draws attention not only to the crotch but also slyly to the numerous anxieties surrounding a genital emphasis that could be deemed "obscene." The inside cover image represents two loggers balancing on their logs, crossing their spears (again), and engaged in friendly combat [fig. 1.3]. Both are shirtless and wear thigh-high laced leather boots that attenuate and define their slender bottoms in contrast to their broad and beefy torsos. A group of three other loggers watch them from a distance.<sup>16</sup>

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<sup>15</sup> Bob Mizer, who published *Physique Pictorial* also gave Laaksonen his moniker, Tom of Finland, because he thought readers would be confused by a Finnish name. Opel (1978), 91.

<sup>16</sup> Below this second image *Physique Pictorial* editors provide the first real description of Tom and his artistic practice: "MEN OF THE FORESTS OF FINLAND is the theme of a new series of drawings prepared by "Tom" an artist who lives in Finland and draws directly from life. He is also going to show us a number of other rugged aspects of the rugged, physical culture minded men of Finland." *Physique Pictorial* 7, no.1 (Spring 1957): 3.

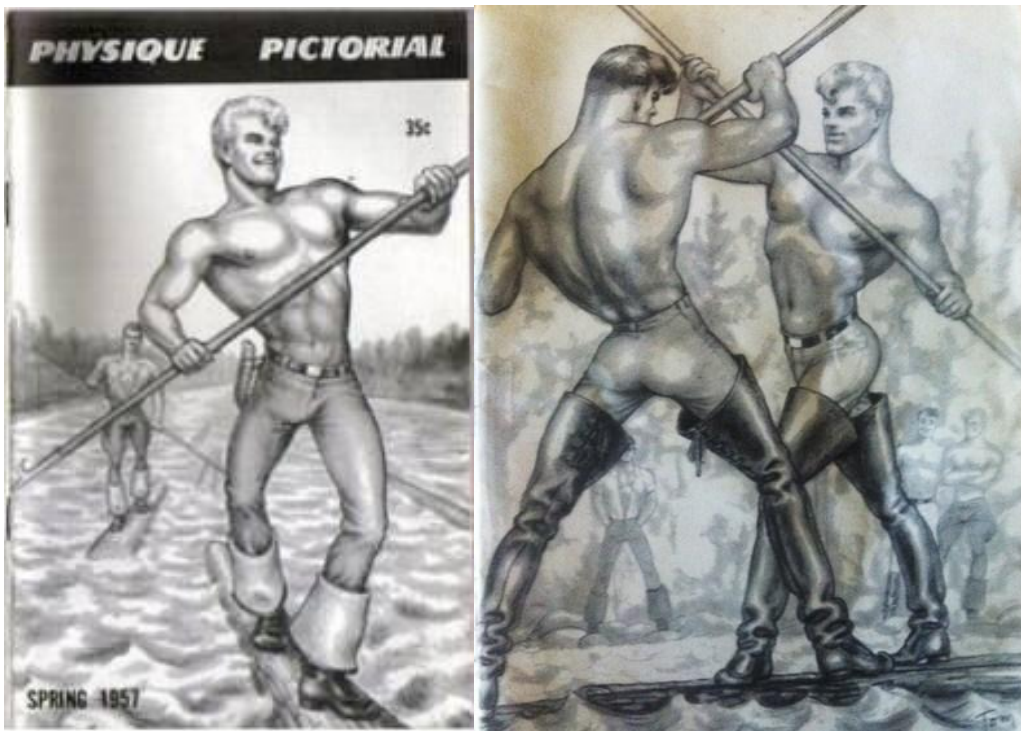


Figure 1.2, 1.3: Tom of Finland, cover and inside cover of *Physique Pictorial*, vol. 7 no. 1, Spring 1957.

Three short years later, the pretense of the working-class athleticism of loggers is dropped in favor of a more explicit eroticism. The Tom of Finland drawing that graces the cover of *Physique Pictorial* in 1960 still draws attention to the crotch, but this time the body itself is the “X” whose points converge at a sizeable, jock-strapped crotch. The handlebars and the seat of the motorcycle (branded with the name “Tom”) which the figure straddles, further enframes and draws attention to the biker’s package [fig. 1.4]. Within the span of three years Tom of Finland’s drawings had become so popular in *Physique Pictorial* that he had begun branding his own drawings, attaching his name to the primary signifiers of then-nascent leather identities: bikes, motorcycle caps, belts, and vests.

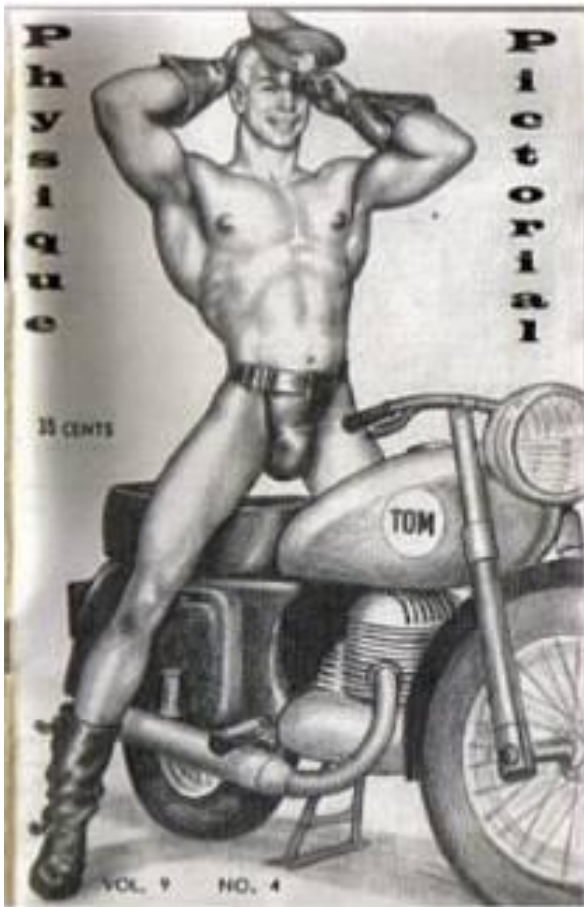


Figure 1.4: Tom of Finland, cover of *Physique Pictorial*, vol. 9 no. 4, April 1960.

As magazines such as *Physique Pictorial* became more brazen in their erotics they became the direct target of juridical scrutiny. One of *Physique Pictorial*'s competitors was the defendant in the 1962 Supreme Court case *MANual Enterprises v. Day*.<sup>17</sup> Ultimately the court determined that the soft-core images of semi-nude and nude men appearing in a number of beefcake magazines did not count as obscene. *MANual Enterprises v. Day* truly paved the way for an American proliferation of male “beefcake” magazines that would afterwards only faintly cloak their motives through a sport alibi.<sup>18</sup>

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<sup>17</sup> *MANual Enterprises v. Day*. No. 123. Supreme Court of the US. June 25, 1962.

<sup>18</sup> For much more on this topic see Thomas Waugh, *Hard to Imagine: Gay Male Eroticism in Photography and Film from Their Beginnings to Stonewall* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1996).

The decision also importantly shifted the onus of obscenity away from the “average person.” Justice John M. Harlan II, writing the majority opinion, modified the Roth decision and determined that obscenity standards should be derived from a national/federal “community,” due to the fact that the materials were seized under the aegis of the Post Office – a federal entity. The Post Office, in effect, had censored the magazine based on offending sections (only a strategic sample of models appearing in these beefcake magazines were nude; the rest wore scant posing straps, that only concealed the barest minimum of flesh) rather than the entire magazine, and so their seizure ran counter to the Roth decision’s enumeration that the work in question be considered offensive as a whole. The *MANual Enterprises v. Day* decision marked a relaxation of censorship law.

Famously, in 1964 Justice Potter Stewart remarked that the litmus test for “hard-core” pornographic material, one of the kinds of speech that could be censored and deemed obscene, was subjective – “I know it when I see it.”<sup>19</sup> For those of us working within the realms of visual culture, Stewart’s statement is telling. Stewart’s criteria was resolutely visual and filtered through a rhetoric of “common sense”; knowledge existing through vision. But Stewart’s folksy way of making sense of a messy question – when is something obscene? – suggests not that Stewart is the sole arbiter of what is or is not obscene, but that the “community standards” which dictate the boundaries of obscene/not-obscene reflect the unspoken and unchallenged knowledge possessed by individuals, particularly those in positions of legal power. Had this language been issued

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<sup>19</sup> *Jacobellis v. Ohio*. No. 11. Supreme Court of the US. June 22, 1964. Concurrence authored by Justice Potter Stewart, emphasis mine. Stewart’s opinion was one of four majority opinions authored by the court. This, along with Stewart’s nebulous definition, yet again points to the ways in which pornographic material was highly contentious.

in the majority opinion instead of a concurring opinion, there would no doubt have been a series of challenges to such ambiguous and subjective language. As it is, however, it stands as a continuing example of the failure of language to describe the boundaries of, and possible relationships between, obscenity and community.

A court case concerning the late 18<sup>th</sup> century novel *Fanny Hill* or *Memoirs of a Woman of Pleasure*, made things better for those trafficking in potentially prurient content.<sup>20</sup> In 1966, the Supreme Court justices declared that although two of the Roth criteria could undoubtedly be met – the novel, in the majority opinion of the court, was certainly of “prurient interest” and could be declared “patently offensive” –its status as having “no redeeming social value” was ultimately questionable. Effectively this case expanded the Roth decision and first amendment rights by putting the burden of proof onto the offended party to prove that an object has no redeeming social value whatsoever, a difficult argument to make. There is evidence that after this 1966 decision “obscenity arrests and convictions sharply dropped.”<sup>21</sup>

Whatever expansion of protections *Memoirs v. Massachusetts* offered, they were hemmed in by *Miller v. California* (1973) which claimed that, “A work may be subject to state regulation where that work, taken as a whole, appeals to the prurient interest in sex; portrays, in a patently offensive way, sexual conduct specifically defined by the applicable state law; and, taken as a whole, does not have serious literary, artistic, political, or scientific value.”<sup>22</sup> There is an important semantic difference here between

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<sup>20</sup> *Memoirs v. Massachusetts*. No. 368. Supreme Court of the US. March 21, 1966.

<sup>21</sup> Robert Bienvenu. “The Development of Sadomasochism as a Cultural Style in the Twentieth-Century United States” (Dissertation, Indiana University, 1998), 127.

<sup>22</sup> *Miller v. California*. No. 70-73. Supreme Court of the US. June 21, 1973.



Miller's evaluative criteria and the earlier test of "utterly without redeeming social value" from Roth. Miller renamed the "contemporary community standards" discussed in Roth as belonging to the State, and not the purview of federal or personal opinion. Instead of one statute, there could now effectively be fifty.

This would, for anyone trading in potentially obscene pornographic material in the United States, cause serious pause – especially if one was engaged in the national distribution of photographic or lithographic reproductions of Tom of Finland drawings. That definitions of community vacillated so much within the fifteen years between *Roth* and *Miller* points to the unstable position of the terms used to recognize and mobilize community as an arbiter of prurient content. This mapping provides a related corollary to the contentiousness of the definition of *what* could be considered obscene. In essence, these two terms are bound together. Like the rear penetration in the 1967 Tom of Finland drawing, the exact linguistic description of what could be considered obscene was only hinted at but never formally described because it was so strongly concatenated with amorphous and shifting definitions of community. While these decisions were being made in the highest court in the United States, Tom of Finland's work was finding a steady audience through *Physique Pictorial*. His long-form comic series – the continuing adventures of a character named Kake is the most elaborate example – depicted penetrative sex increasingly and were first published in 1967 by publishers in Denmark and Sweden. These comics, and collections of images in slim booklets and calendars

were shortly thereafter distributed through a growing network of gay businesses selling leather, magazines, and sex toys in Europe and the United States.<sup>23</sup>

Unsurprisingly, American publishers were reluctant to publish a drawing as sexually graphic as the 1967 Tom of Finland drawing. And so the drawing was not, to my knowledge, officially reproduced or openly traded within the United States during the late 1960s. It only appears in later collections of Tom of Finland's work and biographies (tomes which I'll briefly discuss at the end of this chapter). From Tom of Finland's debut on the 1957 *Physique Pictorial* cover until 1977 the artist's work was only reproduced and published officially through the photographic studios and distributors such as the Athletic Model Guild, Kris Studio, Colt Studio, Target Studios, and in magazines such as *Drummer* and *Queen's Quarterly*.<sup>24</sup> As one author put it, "All the rest of the existing material on the U.S market has been pirated," as opposed to Europe, where "30 booklets and magazines have been published, and Tom did the murals in 'Tom's Saloon,' a leather bar in Hamburg. Several of his best works are in private collections and have never been published. The total number of his drawings is well over 1,000, most in pencil."<sup>25</sup> The 1967 Tom of Finland drawing is, presumably, one in the "over 1,000" mentioned here. Although Tom of Finland's official distribution in the United States was limited, it was nevertheless highly visible and influential. Many leather bars displayed reproductions – cheap commercial lithographs or photoprints of Tom of Finland's drawings – most of them, as has already been noted, pirated. He was an important figure for those who later

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<sup>23</sup> Micha Ramakers, *Dirty Pictures: Tom of Finland, Masculinity and Homosexuality* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1997), 5.

<sup>24</sup> An ad for a "picture-story" sold through *Queen's Quarterly* elaborated on the shipping: "Sent in plainly-marked, carefully-sealed manila envelope via 1<sup>st</sup> class." *Queen's Quarterly* 8, no. 4 (July/August 1976): 43.

<sup>25</sup> "Drummer Goes to Eons' Tom of Finland Showing," *Drummer* 2, no. 13 (1977): 16.

helped to define a particular look within gay male leather communities of the 1960s and the 1970s.

In his column in *Drummer*, filmmaker Fred Halsted recaps Tom of Finland's publication history, emphasizing his own relationship to the Finn's work:

I first saw [Tom of Finland's] work in 1952 [sic] at the Universal Bookstand in Las Palmas via *AMG Physique Pictorial*, Bob Misner's [sic] magazine. For too many years that was THE magazine; in curious ways DRUMMER is its heir [...] His active fantasy art has turned me (and the rest of gay men) on for as long as I can remember.<sup>26</sup>

Long before Tom of Finland excited Fred Halsted, it was the body-building and athletic magazines (who would eventually publish Tom) that excited Tom of Finland, "I got my inspiration from pictures I saw in American body building magazines. I was very excited by them. I found the American type so attractive I started to draw them."<sup>27</sup> Tom of Finland and Fred Halsted, although generationally removed from one another, shared a set of visual cultural texts.

Even though Fred Halsted claims that he had been a fan of Tom of Finland's work "for as long as [he could] remember," Tom's first official solo exhibition in the United States was held in 1978 at Stompers, a combination boot shop and art gallery.<sup>28</sup> Earlier,

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<sup>26</sup> Fred Halsted, "Fred Halsted," *Drummer* 3, no. 21 (1977): 79. Halsted's columns, which vacillated somewhere between leather social gossip and erotic fiction, also documents the attendees of Tom's first visit to the United States. Halsted lists Michael Kearns (The Happy Hustler), Buddah Mae, the leather artist Jakal, Robert Opel, Jeanne Barney, Rev. Troy Perry (Metropolitan Community Church), David Glasscock, Etienne (of Chicago), John Embry, Charles Farber (film critic), Barry Diller (chairman of the board of Paramount Pictures), and Jim French amongst others.

<sup>27</sup> Opel (1978), 91.

<sup>28</sup> Stompers was a combination boot shop/ gallery. Jack Prescott, writing for *Drummer* magazine registers shock at this combination ("It's a fuckin' gallery!") and namechecks Etienne and Tom of Finland while

in 1977, the artist visited the United States for the first time and formed key distribution partnerships with a variety of publishing entities. 1978 is fairly late considering that his work had become so familiar and popular to leather audiences throughout the 1950s and 1960s. But, in a way, this timeline makes sense; the 1970s were a period of growth and public exposure for leather communities – facilitated in no small part by the court cases outlined above, which set the stage for such expansions within select, often urban, locales.

I place my dissertation work in the middle of the period of these expansions, rather than attempting to trace a developmental, originary narrative. I am following the counsel of Gayle Rubin who initially, “wanted to find the ‘origins’ of leather,” but as she later admits, “I have been unable to pinpoint anything so clear.”<sup>29</sup> Still she elucidates the particular lineaments of leather in the 70s: “The 1970s were a time of immense growth and specializations of the institutions of the leather community. There were many new bars, some with more distinct clientele, and there were new kinds of institutions such as bathhouses and sex clubs that catered to the male leather population.”<sup>30</sup>

The timeline of the source material I examine in my dissertation largely falls between the years 1966 and 1984, encompassing the decade of the 70s and buttressing it on either side by a few years. The “triumphant expansion” of the period is evidenced

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using the images of the then-current exhibition (of the artist Domino) to fantasize, and then go home with, another Stompers customer. The gallery thus becomes a space for purchasing gear/art, viewing, fantasizing, and cruising. Jack Prescott, “Stompers,” *Drummer* 4, no. 27 (1978): 72-73.

<sup>29</sup> Rubin (1994), 91.

<sup>30</sup> Rubin (1994), 185.

through a tertiary examination of the bar listings in *Drummer* magazine.<sup>31</sup> Each issue published in 1977 lists over 150 leather bars and clubs across the United States and Canada. These institutions existed in big-cities (New York, Chicago, Los Angeles and San Francisco) and medium-sized municipalities (New Orleans, Denver, Boston, Dallas) alike.

*Drummer*, as stated in my preface, is one of the primary archives I access, and so it is worth describing the magazine's history, if only briefly. *Drummer's* beginnings are tied, at least nominally, to the publication of a small-format magazine entitled *DRUM*, published by the Philadelphia-based homophile organization The Janus Society - not to be confused with The Society of Janus, a BDSM affinity organization begun by Cynthia Slater in 1974 who was, no doubt, aware of the early Homophile organization. *DRUM*, was similar to other early homophile publications such as *One* (put out by ONE, Inc.) and *The Ladder* (published by The Daughters of Bilitis), in that it contained a mélange of articles covering literature, the arts, politics, and issues germane to homophile readerships. Unlike *One* and *The Ladder*, though, *DRUM* contained erotic content, and in 1965, the small-format magazine began publishing nude pictorials. *DRUM* took its name from a line penned in 1854 by Henry David Thoreau in his conclusion to *Walden*: "If a man does not keep pace with his companions, perhaps it is because he hears a different drummer."<sup>32</sup> The homophile magazine ceased production in 1967, after its publisher was

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<sup>31</sup> Gayle Rubin, "The Miracle Mile: South of Market and Gay Male Leather in San Francisco 1962- 1996," in *Reclaiming San Francisco: History, Politics, Culture*, eds. James Brook, et al. (San Francisco: City Lights Books, 1998), 259.

<sup>32</sup> Henry David Thoreau, *Walden* (Philadelphia and London: Courage Books, 1990), 192. Ebook. As pointed out to me by Henry Abelow, while many homophile organizations were deifying Walt Whitman's depiction of masculinity, *DRUM* and eventually *Drummer*, were grappling with Thoreau. This may be indicative of a kind of ideological break, which warrants further investigation.

indicted on counts of distributing obscene material (the aforementioned nude photo-spreads), and was forced to move from Philadelphia to Los Angeles.<sup>33</sup>

Publisher and Los Angelino John Embry, picked out Thoreau's quotation and in 1971 began publishing *Drummer* magazine, then conceived as an entertainment glossy. This goals of this publication were amended only a year later when Embry joined his concept with the overt political/legal activism of the Homophile Effort for Legal Protection, Incorporated (H.E.L.P., Inc.). *H.E.L.P., Inc./Drummer* appeared in a newspaper format from 1972 until 1975. With the help of editor Jeanne Barney, the magazine returned to a glossy-format with color covers in 1975. It is at this point that *Drummer* becomes explicitly about leatherfolks and sexuality. The re-launched *Drummer* was variously described on its cover as "The Leather Fraternity," "America's Mag For The Macho Male," and "The American Review of Gay Popular Culture." While *Drummer*, as a leather publication, doesn't traverse the entirety of my 1966-1985 timeline, its emergence in the middle of this period points to the rapid expansion of leather communities. The emergence of *Drummer* was a response, in a very marked way, to the growth and dynamism of leather communities and cultural.

I am also interested in these expansions because such rapid growth often produces intra-community anxiety over who, exactly, counts as a part of leather communities. Some of the debates generated by these anxieties rested on demarcating boundaries among different terms. Leather Rick, who would be immortalized in *Fisting Ballet*

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<sup>33</sup> For much more on the history of *DRUM* and other early homophile publications see Rodger Streitmatter, *Unspeakable: The Rise of the Gay and Lesbian Press in America* (Boston: Faber and Faber, 1995); Larry Gross. *Up From Invisibility: Lesbians, Gay Men, and the Media in America* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2001).

(1984), one of the only movies filmed inside the infamous New York bar The Mineshaft, had much to say about his perception of the division between Leather and S&M communities. Writing for *DungeonMaster* he defines a leather community as a bunch of “nurds who just stand around posing,” whose “in-bed sexuality is often fairly conventional” as opposed to an S&M community composed of “lunatics who ‘go too far’,” one that “centers itself on the expression of sexual power.”<sup>34</sup> Leather Rick’s frustration revolves around the fact that both sets of people used the same spaces and symbols and so “both communities get confused.”<sup>35</sup> While I’ve largely side-stepped the impulse to categorically define leather sexuality explicitly, Leather Rick’s argument is provocative because it suggests a multifaceted community under pressure to delineate authentic players from tourists. These anxieties recur throughout the 1970s, making the period endlessly fascinating to me.

This growth and expansion of leather communities, and their attendant new ways of fucking, is also evident in publications with assumed broader gay readerships. For example, the New York magazine *Queen’s Quarterly* (which soon after its inception became just *QQ*) began to feature more and more leather content as the 1970s progressed. A Tom of Finland appreciation appears in a 1972 issue, and a painting by the artist appears on the cover of their October 1973 issue. The magazine’s byline was the amorphous and broadly-worded “For Gay Guys” – indicating that their target audience was more expansive than a strictly-leather audience. By 1978 the magazine published a mini-history written by Walter Norris: “More and more, leather has become a fascination for gay guys. At first it was a fetish; now it’s a lifestyle for many. There are almost as

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<sup>34</sup> Rick Leather, “Two Nations – One Territory: S&M vs Leather,” *DungeonMaster*, no. 5 (July 1980): 1.

<sup>35</sup> Leather, 1.

many reasons why gays are into leather as there are gays.”<sup>36</sup> Here is evidence of the mainstreaming of a community. This article attempts to identify leather aesthetics for a broader gay audience, and thus argues for the easy assimilation of these same men as newly minted leathersmen. Norris ultimately elides leather lifestyle with the broader community of “gay guys.” Concurrently there were many within leather communities who were hostile to this shift, viewing it as an encroachment on their particularized territory. Jack Fritscher remarks in 1978 that, “Now Liberation Leathers are conveniently overpriced in the back of any bar so any freespending leather-drag queen can announce him/her/itself [...]” Leaving Fritscher’s linguistic conflation of drag queens with the ungendered pronoun “it” aside, he importantly binds together the emergence of liberationist political struggles with Capitalist economies – with the unfortunate outcome being most leather-wearing folks are to be considered poseurs.<sup>37</sup> Strangely, Norris is sensitive to these gripes as well when he writes in *Queen’s Quarterly*: “[...] there are those who flirt with [S&M] as a kind of gay social put-on, and those who are so heavily into it as a way of life that they simply won’t brook such (to them) nonsense.”<sup>38</sup>

One figure who was privy to many of these shifting anxieties surrounding the definition(s) and visual apprehension of leatherfolks in the 1970s was Gayle Rubin, who subsequently documented some of these relationships in her 1994 dissertation: *The Valley of the Kings: Leathersmen in San Francisco, 1960-1990*.<sup>39</sup> Trained as an anthropologist, Rubin had already created a sizeable oeuvre of writing in the decades preceding the completion of her dissertation, introducing notions of community and sex as key terms

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<sup>36</sup> Walter Norris, “A Taste for Leather,” *Queen’s Quarterly* 10, no. 3 (July/Aug. 1978): 10-15.

<sup>37</sup> Jack Fritscher, “Getting Off,” *Drummer* 3, no. 24 (1978c): 8.

<sup>38</sup> Norris, 33.

<sup>39</sup> Rubin (1994).



around which a feminist politics might be organized. She is probably best known as the author of “Traffic in Women” (1975) and, more germane to this study, “Thinking Sex” (1984). The latter article is foundational for any scholar wishing to write about sex. Originally a paper given at the highly contentious Scholar and Feminist IX Conference at Barnard College in 1982, “Thinking Sex” provides an historical timeline of the structures and implementation of various vice laws in the United States, which, Rubin elegantly argues, at once naturalize and otherize particular kinds of sex, aiding in the process of social distinction and the production of types/kinds of people. Rubin isolates particular periods when the discourse around sex becomes “dangerously crazy” thus “displacing social anxieties, and discharging their attendant emotional intensity,” onto those who have sex outside of normative boundaries.<sup>40</sup> Her legal timeline is different from the one I enumerated above, as her focus is largely the implementation of vice procedure and the stigmatization of non-normative forms of sex. Rubin’s timeline is worth rehearsing in brief here: The Comstock laws of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, pioneered by Anthony Comstock, made illegal the producing, distributing and selling of pictures or text deemed obscene. These laws gave way to the homosexual panics of the 1950s, in which conservative citizens and juridical bodies surveilled and socially rejected those identified as homosexuals on local, state, and national levels by aligning their deviant sexuality with deviant political ideologies such as Communism.<sup>41</sup> Finally, the eruptions of similar panics in the late 1970s, especially around the education of children, produced prominent pieces of legislation spear-headed (either directly or indirectly) by Anita Bryant that sought to marginalize, through criminalization, homosexuals and by extension the multitudinous kinds of sex they were having.

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<sup>40</sup> Gayle Rubin, “Thinking Sex: Notes for a Radical Theory of the Politics of Sexuality,” in *Pleasure and Danger: Exploring Female Sexuality*, ed. Carol Vance (London: Pandora, 1984), 267-293.

<sup>41</sup> Rubin (1984).

Rubin speaks not only as an anthropologist tracing the cultural practices of moral panics and the enforcement of vice laws, but also as a feminist. As such, Rubin's text became a powerful screed against swelling anti-pornography feminist thought. Billing themselves as adherents of a kind of radical feminism, anti-pornography feminists often used leathersex (although "Sadism" and "Masochism" were the preferred terms in their line of argumentation) as the *ür*-example of a kind of social process, whereby a set of sex practices condoned non-consensual sexual violence. Leathersex was, in this view, also evidence of the false consciousness and internalized misogyny of leatherfolks.<sup>42</sup> Consensual desires and practices were thus made to seem politically incorrect, as mere unthinking reiterations of hegemonic power dynamics. In this regard, the political and social importance of Rubin's work on sex cannot be overstated, as "Thinking Sex" remains a powerful tool for scholars wishing to critically write about sex, and as a key

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<sup>42</sup> The towering figures in this particular body of feminist literature are Andrea Dworkin and Catharine MacKinnon. Famously, their writings were put into practice when the pair proposed a series of legislative actions in parts of the United States as documented in: Catharine MacKinnon and Andrea Dworkin, *In Harm's Way: The Pornography Civil Rights Hearings* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1997). While many of these legislative actions failed to pass, Dworkin and MacKinnon's influence was widely felt in defining the core issues of feminist politics in the 1980s and 1990s. Feminists were heatedly divided over the ideological placement of representations of sex (pornography, and specifically, sadomasochism) as either an operative general principle in sited gender/sex power differentials or as a process for finding pleasure. Much of the split of the 1982 Barnard Scholar and Feminist IX Conference centered around these questions. Organizations such as Women Against Pornography in New York, and Women Against Violence in Pornography and Media in San Francisco, as well as the written work of Pat Califia and Gayle Rubin were central in discussions around a feminist analysis of pornography. Of course, this is a massive flattening of a multi-faceted and decades-long ideological disagreement. While I mainly focus my efforts on Rubin, Califia, and other feminists who generally opposed Dworkin and MacKinnon's efforts, I have a fascination with anti-pornography feminists. What follows is a short bibliography of what I think are the most compelling sources from the camp of anti-pornography feminism. Andrea Dworkin, *Pornography: Men Possessing Women* (London: The Women's Press, 1981). Laura Lederer [editor], *Take Back The Night: Women on Pornography* (New York: W. Morrow, 1980). John Stoltenberg, *What Makes Pornography "Sexy"?* (Milkweed Editions, 1994). This last text, by John Stoltenberg, who was the long-time partner of Andrea Dworkin (eventually they married, and Dworkin continued to identify as a lesbian, Stoltenberg continued to identify as a gay man), explains a series of "Pose Workshops" he conducted. In these workshops groups of men were made to emulate the positions found in pornographic magazines and then talk about their feelings of vulnerability and exposure - ideally coming to a form of "raised-consciousness" about the harm of pornography.

document in understanding the terms of a crucial period of internal debate and upheaval within US feminist communities, now referred to broadly as “The Feminist Sex Wars.”

Rubin’s text is still as radical as they come – especially in terms of her discussions of age-of-consent laws and boy-love. Although Rubin’s argument is most attentive to the moments of great crisis and anxiety around sex, I would add to her analysis that even during moments of “acceptance,” such as our contemporary moment, in which policies and struggles towards of “gay marriage” and “anti-bullying” are foregrounded, there is a way in which LGBTQ people are asked to adhere to a normalizing (heterosexual) matrix that overlooks sexual difference and variety.<sup>43</sup> Arguments for gay marriage on some level reinforce the sex-negative cultures that Rubin excoriates - queers are only granted rights when their relationships conform to the boundaries of civil-sanctioned couplehood (with the understanding that monogamy and reproduction undergird such an institution), an argument that rests on assimilationist narratives that all too frequently erase difference in exchange for the political expediency of obtaining these “rights.”<sup>44</sup> What results is the visibility of some kinds of queer people

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<sup>43</sup> Michael Warner’s concept and attendant critique of heteronormativity - as a mode of LGBTQ social politics that reinforce heterosexuality as *the* matrix upon which queer lives should mirror - is important here, especially in terms of the political push towards marriage equality: “The task of queer social theory in this context as in so many others must be to confront the default heteronormativity of modern culture with its worst nightmare, a queer planet.” Michael Warner, “Introduction: Fear of a Queer Planet,” *Social Text* 9, no. 29 (1991): 16. I should note, too, that Michael Warner uses Gore Vidal’s 1968 novel, *Myra Breckenridge*, as a frame for reading out a kind of anti-heteronormative queerness. I love that Warner willfully misreads Vidal’s character - a transsexual who wants to destroy all vestiges of manhood - as an earnest push towards queerness. Breckenridge was really a satiric vehicle for skewering film critic Parker Tyler, specifically, and radical feminism, in general. In this way Warner turns the rhetoric of Vidal’s condescension into one of new queer empowerment. Gore Vidal, *Myra Breckenridge* (Boston: Little Brown, 1968).

<sup>44</sup> See Jasbir Puar, “In The Wake of It Gets Better,” *The Guardian*, Nov. 16, 2010; Lisa Duggan, “The New Homonormativity: The Sexual Politics of Neoliberalism,” in *Materializing Democracy: Towards a Revitalized Cultural Politics*, eds. Russ Castronovo and Dana D. Nelson (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2002); Margot Weiss, “Gay Shame and BDSM Pride: Neoliberalism, Privacy, and Sexual Politics,” *Radical History Review*, no. 100 (2008): 87-101; Lauren Berlant and Michael Warner, “Sex in Public,” in *Intimacy*, ed. Lauren Berlant (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2000).

(long-term committed couples), and the marginalization those who organize their lives differently. This is one of the reasons why even while gays and lesbians enjoy greater visibility, some of the most radical and important histories, such as the one I attempt to tell in this dissertation, remain beneath the level of public discourse. Even twenty years on, discussing how we fuck, a central concern of Rubin's in "Thinking Sex," is still necessary to finding meaning in honoring difference amongst queer people.

In one of her most illuminating passages in "Thinking Sex" Rubin points out the existence of a charmed circle of heterosexual, monogamous, procreative, coupled, vanilla, au naturel, domesticated sex that precludes (morally, legally) homosexual, promiscuous, recreational, group, SM, sextoy-aided, public sex. The former is coded as natural while the latter is understood to be unnatural.<sup>45</sup> The illustration/chart that accompanies her argument is organized into two concentric circles [**fig. 1.5**], the inner being what Rubin designates as the "charmed" circle of heterosexual (etc.) sex. Rubin's illustration brilliantly and visually suggests the absurdity of such codings – very few are safely inside the charmed circle at all times. Due to its concentric placement, the illustration of the "charmed" circle suggests a smaller population, located inside perversion. To be one of the charmed circle is to willfully constrict a more expansive sex. Far from visualizing normative sex as containing, and thus perhaps controlling non-normative sex, in Rubin's imagining it is non-normative sex that is the container. Counter to the history that Rubin enumerates in "Thinking Sex" where sex deviants are often jailed for their non-conformist behavior, Rubin uses her chart to "jail" normative sex. The intimation, then, is that deviants and sexual boundary-crossers are legion. And as absurd

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<sup>45</sup> Rubin (1984).

as these boundaries seem to be, they also provide an impetus for people to establish identities and communities around and across such borders.

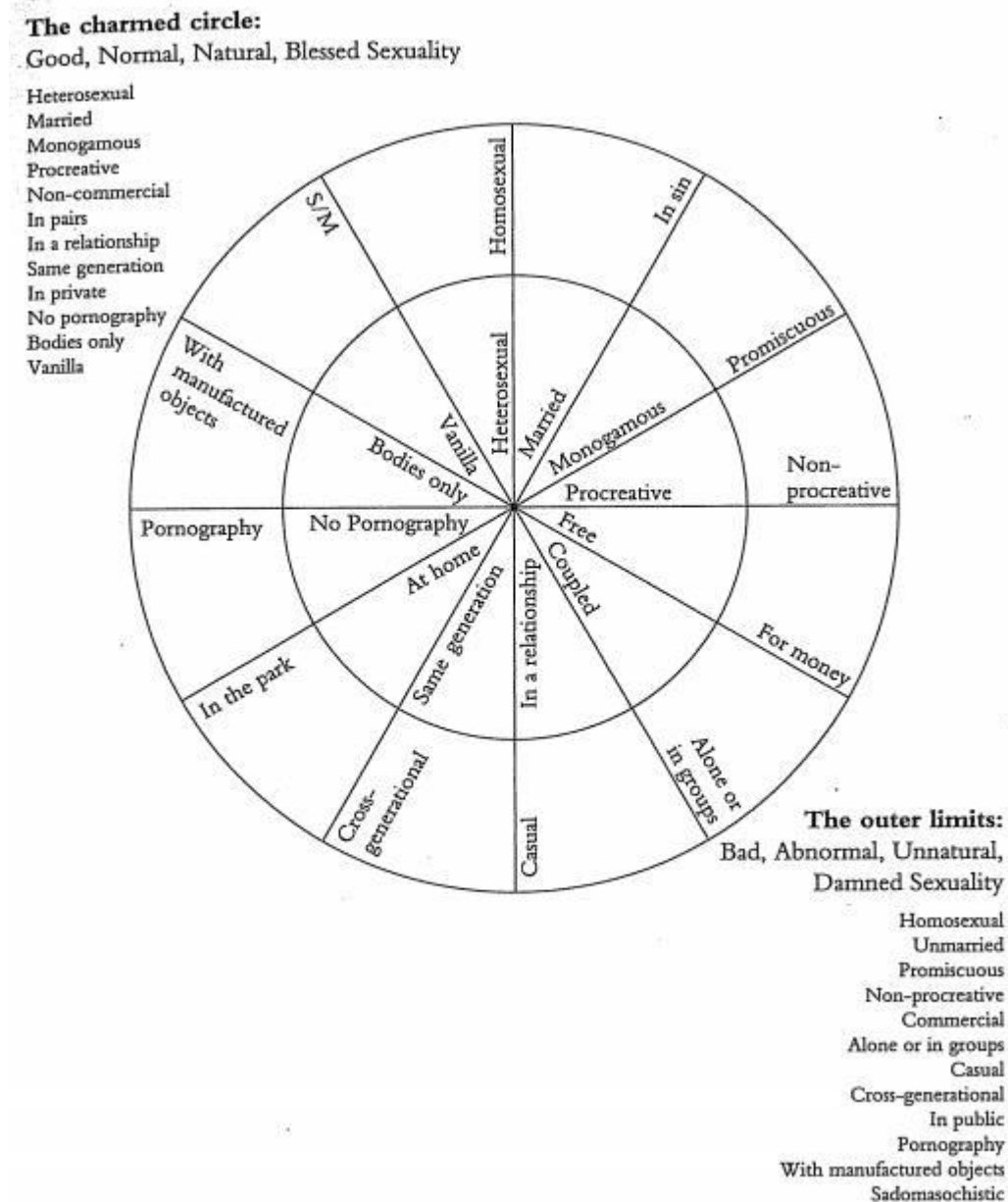


Figure 1.5: Gayle Rubin, "The Charmed Circle vs. The Outer Limits."

Rubin's "Thinking Sex" was informed directly by her involvement with leather communities. When "Thinking Sex" debuted at the Barnard conference Rubin had already been a member of various leather communities and organizations, lesbian and pansexual. And as I'll point out later in this introduction, "Thinking Sex" also coincides, roughly, with the dissolution of Samois, a lesbian leather group that Rubin helped to found and foster. Thus, "Thinking Sex" can also be read as a statement of practice, political and sexual, not just a broad historiography of non-normative sex. This is a line that continues throughout Rubin's work pre- and post-"Thinking Sex." Her larger corpus is equal parts visual culture studies, social history, and ethnography. Rubin's work shuttles along these various discursive/disciplinary tracks and is not only a model in terms of tackling difficult or unconsidered subjects, but a call for the necessity of doing so both within and outside of academia. For example, her short article on the music playlist at a fist-fucking club published for *Cuir Underground*, a magazine geared towards pansexual leather communities in the 1990s, is ultimately just as instructive as the more academically-inflected and footnoted "Thinking Sex" because it outlines, in very specific (if brief) terms, how music was an integral part of the experience of fist-fucking - the act of inserting a full fist into a rectum/vagina.<sup>46</sup> Ultimately, Rubin's goal is to open out notions of what kinds of sex are acceptable, and to trace, in an unambiguous way, those systems that name and reiterate both normative and non-normative sex practices and identities.

Practice is often strongly tied to identity, although not always in the most expected ways. Rubin is one of many authors who explore the complicated ways people identify with and through fucking. In joining this retinue, I aim to be like Madeline Davis

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<sup>46</sup> Gayle Rubin, "Music From a Bygone Era," *Cuir Underground* 3, no. 4 (May 1997): 5, 7.

and Elizabeth Lapovsky Kennedy, who in their study of butch lesbians in pre-Stonewall Buffalo speak against “relegate[ing] sex to a position of less importance, viewing it as only incidentally relevant.”<sup>47</sup> For Davis and Kennedy taking sex seriously resulted in an “exploratory and tentative” (but no less powerful) argument against the misconception that butch-fem (their spelling) lesbian identities did little more than ape heterosexual structures.<sup>48</sup> Davis and Kennedy’s “shyly” asked questions regarding their subjects’ sex lives netted incredible evidence to the contrary of spurious claims of heterosexuality as the butches who took on more masculine appearance, often took the role socially expected of the female in male/female sexual relations, providing and gaining sexual satisfaction in pleasing their fem partner.<sup>49</sup> Davis and Kennedy also trace the difficulties of performing, and eventually reading, oral histories around sexual mores where contradictory evidence is bountiful; I am indebted to their solid groundwork on this particular issue in research, and thus I have incorporated their feminist ethnographic methodology most specifically in my seventh chapter.

Another author whose work predates Rubin, yet who asks similar questions regarding sexual (non-)normativity, albeit in semi-fictional form, is John Rechy. I want to focus most particularly on his 1967 novel *Numbers*. Rechy, it must be noted, had an ongoing and mostly contentious relationship with leathersex and communities; he was one of its most vocal critics within gay presses, calling leathersex little more than theater, even as he sympathetically rendered in prose the atrocities of the Mark IV raid (an event

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<sup>47</sup> Madeline Davis and Elizabeth Lapovsky Kennedy, “Oral History and the Study of Sexuality in the Lesbian Community: Buffalo, New York, 1940-1960,” *Feminist Studies* 12, no. 1 (Spring 1986): 7. For an expanded version of Davis and Kennedy’s analysis see, Madeline Davis and Elizabeth Lapovsky Kennedy, *Boots of Leather, Slippers of Gold: The History of a Lesbian Community* (New York and London: Routledge, 1992).

<sup>48</sup> Davis and Kennedy (1986), 10.

<sup>49</sup> *Ibid.*, 9.

discussed in detail in my seventh chapter).<sup>50</sup> And so, even though it might seem a mistake to turn to an individual so vociferously opposed to leathersex to further draw out the significance of non-normative sex in the 1960s-1980s, the benefits of reading Rechy's fiction outweighs the negative ideology he often espoused in his editorial writings.

As *Numbers* opens, the protagonist, former hustler Johnny Rio, has been absent from the life of tricking in Los Angeles for a few years. Rechy shares a similar history with his protagonist, and in interviews and lectures Rechy has often positioned Johnny Rio as an analogue to himself.<sup>51</sup> The cruising grounds of Griffith Park covered by Rio in *Numbers* were indeed the same cruising grounds used by Rechy. Upon his return, and in a quest to find himself through the desire accorded to him by others, Rio decides to challenge himself to acquiring thirty (mostly anonymous) tricks within the short time span of ten days. What follows is a string of days, demarcated only by the amount and quality of the anonymous sex Rio has.

When, finally at the novel's end, Rio achieves his goal of thirty tricks in ten days, he briefly considers quitting hustling. At a dinner party Rio enters into an inner monologue in which he forsakes his former life:

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<sup>50</sup> Winston Leyland, *Gay Sunshine Interviews: Volume I* (Gay Sunshine Press, 1978): 258; John Rechy, *The Sexual Outlaw* (Dell Publishing Co., 1978).

<sup>51</sup> "I once--and quite literally--became a character from one of my own books. My second novel, *Numbers*, was set mainly in Griffith Park, its protagonist a young man named Johnny Rio, who spends his idle time seeking adventures in the park. I was idling in the same park one afternoon--still anonymous--when a stranger braked his car to tell me that someone had written a book about me. 'Who?' I asked, befuddled. 'His name is John Rechy,' he said, 'but I don't think that's his real name because nobody would write a book like that under his own name.' As he left, he called back, 'Goodbye, Johnny Rio'" John Rechy, "Real People as Fictional Characters: Some Comic, Sad, and Dangerous Encounters" (lecture, Los Angeles Institute of the Humanities, Sept. 21, 2007).



Never, *never* again. Not in the Park, nor in any other park, nor in movie balconies. It'll be only with people with identities – men *or* women – people I know, not people without names – not just ‘numbers.’ *That* was the spooky part; that’s what the Park was all about... and the numbers. But I’m in control again, and that’s what I won.<sup>52</sup>

It is in this moment of departure from the world of hustling that the other guests at the dinner party (whom up until this point Rio has held in deep contempt because they are monied gay men, representative of a normativized homosexual intelligentsia) start to collaborate in reorganizing Rio’s sexuality as something safely within the boundaries of something like Rubin’s charmed circle.<sup>53</sup> A man named Sebastian tells Rio:

But you still haven’t explored... a further country, dear John. And until you do, you’ll never know if *that* is *it*: yes, what could, just possibly could, make you happy. Until you do, you simply can’t be completely – truly – free of a world you’ve explored only in part [...] The country of sharing mutually of course, one for one [...] and... perhaps... of finding *one*... number.<sup>54</sup>

Happiness and liberation are bound up in monogamous coupling, “sharing mutually...one for one.” The divide between Rio’s hustling and this alternative organization of sexual/affective coupling is tellingly and paradoxically allegorized as a foreign country. “Foreign” as a descriptor is spoken by the normative Sebastian in an Orientalizing mode, whereby Rio is meant to be tantalized by the exoticism of coupling. Yet Sebastian’s positing of coupling as a foreign country also reveals something about Rio’s subjectivity, and not the cultural norms of the dinner-party gays. No doubt, in the context of the dinner

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<sup>52</sup> John Rechy, *Numbers* (New York: Grove Press, 1968), 235.

<sup>53</sup> Sebastian and his dinner guests are modeled off of Christopher Isherwood, whom John Rechy held in contempt but still described as attractive, following Isherwood’s own advice that when modeling fictional characters off of persons in life one can “...question their morals, call them liars, expose them as thieves--as long as you describe them as attractive.” Rechy (2007).

<sup>54</sup> Rechy (1968), 235-6.

party Rio is apprehended as the foreigner – in both sex practice and ethnicity (Rio, as an analogue to Rechy, is represented as a Chicano character). Importantly, in having Sebastian pitch the monogamous life to Rio in this loaded way, Rechy presents the self-centered, short-term, mostly-anonymous sexual practices of Rio as a place; his non-normative sexual practices and values are allegorized in terms of a homeland. Monogamy is envisioned as a place for Rio to romantically colonize, a place to be “free of a world” that Sebastian can only see in restrictive terms, as self-destructive and illogical.

Regardless of his condescension, Sebastian actually initiates something of a crisis of self within Rio, who takes the elder privileged man’s words to heart. It is here, in the context of this brief conversation with Sebastian, an abutment with sex normativity, that a reader might begin to sympathize with the dinner-party gays who moralize Rio’s character as a deeply *unhappy* hustler.

Rio quickly exhibits a newfound excitement in finding “*one...number*”. Soon after the dinner party ends, and in a passage that at first seems to confirm both Sebastian’s moral superiority/sexual conservatism as well as Rio’s almost pathological drive for sex, Rio tricks again, this time with one of the dinner party guests. Through this sexual experience Rio gains an “intimate knowledge of that further country.”<sup>55</sup> Persuaded by the belief that this guest could be the “one,” Rechy’s narrative veers dangerously close to presenting a morality play about the reformation of a hustler – thus leaving the boundaries of the charmed circle of sex ultimately unchallenged, and worse, further reinforced. Thankfully, this knowledge, like many of Rio’s sexual contacts, is short-lived, and, in a masterful turn, literally nauseates Rio as he drives away from his encounter.

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<sup>55</sup> Rechy (1968), 240.

Rio vomits out the window: “That country - ... [Rio] thinks. It wasn’t mine.”<sup>56</sup>

In a book littered with sexual climaxes, the moment of narrative climax is one of vomiting – an unambiguous marker of physical illness. Rechy deftly unmoors the socially-ill body from deviant sexuality, and insists on a very literal corporeal harm normative sexual expectations can cause. The idea and the enactment of monogamy make Rio sick to the point where his insides become his outsides. This is a transformative realization of self. It is the enlightenment running counter to Sebastian’s suggestion; relationships matter but on Rio’s terms, within the borders of his home “country.”

After this incident Rio continues to count his numbers/tricks past thirty. His is a drive that is insistent and unslake-able. And why should it end? As Rio dryly puts it, “There never was a reason, I’m just here and that’s all.”<sup>57</sup>

Thus we might imagine non-normative sex, through the character of Johnny Rio, and Rubin’s “Thinking Sex,” as a condition not of radical being always positioned counter to some norm, but of being itself: “There never was a reason, I’m just here and that’s all.” As Rubin and Rechy present the very ordinariness of non-normative sex, they undercut what may be its most salient feature to those who believe they are safely within

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<sup>56</sup> Ibid.

<sup>57</sup> Rechy (1968), 255. Other authors like Renaud Camus pick up on similar themes. In Camus’ *Tricks: 25 Encounters*, each chapter details a specific sexual experience (or set of experiences) and is named after the individual trick. The social worlds of Camus’ tricks intersect and interlock, sometimes in ways that are harmful to the author and sometimes in ways that are pleasant and forgettable. In each of these cases the author builds a world *without* the utopian community politically activated by a shared sense of purpose. The world works as well as it can as these protagonists (Camus and Rio) navigate, and sometimes stumble, through social situations that value (mostly) anonymous contact over collective identity. Renaud Camus, *Tricks: 25 Encounters* (London: St. Martin’s Press, 1981).

the borders of the charmed circle of sex – namely the titillation of the exotic and unfamiliar.<sup>58</sup>

## BEING *IN* COMMON

The complexity of community thus relates to the difficult interaction between the tendencies originally distinguished in the historical development: on the one hand the sense of direct common concern; on the other hand the materialization of various forms of common organization, which may or may not adequately express this. Community can be the warmly persuasive word to describe an existing set of relationships, or the warmly persuasive word to describe an alternative set of relationships. What is most important, perhaps, is that unlike all other terms of social organization (*state, nation, society*, etc.) it seems never to be used unfavourably, and never to be given any positive opposing or distinguishing term.<sup>59</sup>

As usual, Raymond Williams displays an extraordinary gift for at once revealing the etymology of a term and also exposing its particular vulnerabilities. In the case of community he points out the fact that the term has never been “used unfavorably,” implying a bias inherent in the use of term. Williams is aware of this romanticizing, as he iterates not once, but twice, that the term is “warmly persuasive.” This is true for both the

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<sup>58</sup> Currently, as I finish off this dissertation, the *Fifty Shades of Grey* trilogy is resting comfortably atop the paperback bestseller charts. Indeed, *Fifty Shades of Grey*, which traces the interaction between a wealthy heterosexual dom male and a younger, female initiate to BDSM practice, has become something of a cultural phenomenon, introducing a general public to the structures of BDSM relationships. That the trilogy is doing extremely well in e-book format is indicative perhaps of the stigma that BDSM practice still carries – no one wants to be *seen* reading it, although everyone is. Its appeal to a largely heterosexual female audience conforms to the normative modes within the pop-culture Romance genre – a powerful, rich, sexually desirable male fulfills and enraptures a newbie female, inculcating her into a heretofore unknown world of sexual pleasure and desire. It also confirms that it is only through a singular relationship with a male that a female can find/discover her own sexual pleasure. The *Fifty Shades of Grey* trilogy would be unremarkable, except that it is BDSM that at once makes it an object of sexual desire and public shame. Nothing better illustrates this than an anecdote related by a close friend, and reader of *Fifty Shades of Grey*. While she read the paperback version of the first book on a recent plane trip she had an interaction with a nearby passenger, a self-identified religious conservative who at once condemned and extolled the book – exclaiming how “nasty” the book while fanning herself as though she was in fact, herself, hot and bothered. E.L. James, *Fifty Shades of Grey* (Random House, Inc., 2012).

<sup>59</sup> Raymond Williams, *Keywords* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1983), 76.

“existing sets of relationships” (normative), *and* an “alternative set of relationships” (non-normative) that he describes. Regardless of what sets of purposes the group is organized around – the application of the terminology of community has a similar effect.<sup>60</sup>

Community, or rather the shadow of the idea of community as an ontological state, is in fact, partly responsible for these categories of normative/non-normative evidenced by the amorphous renderings of the term in the U.S. Supreme Court cases rehearsed above. Community comes to mean nation, non-profit group, couple, individual.<sup>61</sup> But how to locate what *binds* a community? Williams names these binding agents as “common concern” and “common organization.”

While it may at first appear easy to pinpoint what constitutes a “common concern” or “common organization,” in reality the common is a set of complex modes of identification. An example would be a remark made by philosopher Jean Luc-Nancy in an essay about the Bosnian War, “What I have in common with another Frenchman is the fact of *not* being the same Frenchman as him, and the fact that our ‘Frenchness’ is never,

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<sup>60</sup> This problem is nobly and polemically taken up by Miranda Joseph, for whom the over-use of the term community implies a romanticizing which takes community-organizing outside of the realm of economic/cultural power relationships. Miranda Joseph, *Against the Romance of Community* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2002). While Joseph doesn’t call for “...a complete abandonment of identity or community” she does call into question the methods in which “community” is invoked by non-profits, NGOs and activist collectives to represent their activities as fostering the “cherished ideals of co-operation, equality and communion” (174). Elided in this pervasive definition and representation of community are bad feelings, grudges, inequality, and an ever-present complicity with larger systems of oppression and hierarchical arrangement. Joseph positions community as an integral, but unrecognized, part of industrial-capitalisms (*vii*). The effect is that those writing after Joseph, like myself, are not able to take for granted, and thus romanticize the *idea* of community, which for anyone who has been involved in community organizing, maintenance and dissolution is markedly different from the *experience* of community.

<sup>61</sup> Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities. Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism* (London: Verso, 1991).

nowhere, in no essence, in no figure, brought to completion.”<sup>62</sup> In other words it is the difference between two like-named or constituted people which actually holds them in common. That “Frenchness,” a way of ascribing a national commonality or identity, is “never, nowhere [...] brought to completion” speaks to the ongoing process of making, reiterating and redefining communities.

When applied to sex Williams’ and Nancy’s ideations of community take on particular relevance. Sex is, indeed, a common way we organize our bodies in relation to others. And yet this common organization is ephemeral; bodily *and* ideologically predicated on the difference and shifting power dynamics between participating bodies. When discussing (and thus attempting to name) a community, such as leather communities, there are elisions; while a fist-fucker is not necessarily the same as a person into rope bondage, both share the commonality of non-normative sexual practice. That we can’t “bring to completion” these communities, is ultimately a useful strategy. A commonality which might be understood under a homogenized umbrella, such leathersex, in actuality only indicates an utter diversity of sexual practice which is elided for the “warmly persuasive” ideology of community. As I’ve described above, that labels such as leather and S&M were highly contentious during the time in which they were being most often deployed indicates a continuous undoing and redrawing of the boundaries of leather communities.

The answer then, must be to insist on the unmaking of these boundaries, on their unfixity. Nancy, in his seminal text *The Inoperative Community*, is attuned to the fact

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<sup>62</sup> Jean-Luc Nancy, *Being Singular Plural*, trans. Robert D. Richardson and Anne E. O’Byrne (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2000), 155.

community exists precisely within its own unmaking or undoing. Individual identities are “merely the residue of the experience of the dissolution of community,” identities which are falsely taken “as origin and as certainty.”<sup>63</sup> Here Nancy rethinks the whole foundation of the immanent individual, viewing individuality as the *product* of community rather than being *a priori* to it.<sup>64</sup>

Nancy also concentrates on what ideological uses of community *do* within larger national and philosophical discourses – kinds of common organizations. Nancy works against building a codified definition of community, or even a historiography of community (à la Foucauldian genealogy), and so challenges the “warmly persuasive” quality of community.<sup>65</sup> Indeed, after reading Nancy’s *The Inoperative Community* one is mostly unsure about what community may actually be. At its most basic, though, Nancy’s definition of community is “being in common”:

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<sup>63</sup> Jean-Luc Nancy, *The Inoperative Community*, trans. Peter Connor, et. al. (Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press, 1991), 3.

<sup>64</sup> His definition has implications for the discipline of art history in so far as art objects only become art objects in their contingent placement amongst bodies, institutions, and other objects. Indeed, Nancy’s claims inspired the curatorial practice of Nicolas Bourriaud closely tied to the artistic practices of relational aesthetic artists and the work of art historians and critics like Miwon Kwon. For further uses of Nancy’s ideas within a contemporary art historical framework see: Nicolas Bourriaud, *Relational Aesthetics*, trans. Simon Pleasance, et. al. (Dijon: Les Presses du Réel, 2002); Sandhini Poddar, *Being Singular Plural* (New York: Guggenheim, 2012); Miwon Kwon, *One Place After Another: Site-Specific Art and Locational Identity* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2004).

<sup>65</sup> Because I’ve made a passing reference to Foucault here, I might well expand on what I intend. I refer to the term genealogy as Foucault used it in *Discipline and Punish*, closely related to his earlier concept of archaeology, as a method of apprehending historiographical power shifts without relying on the primacy of the intent of any particular individual. Indeed, these shifts occur, almost subconsciously on a socio-cultural and juridical level, and Foucault often picks out emblematic examples. The most famous of these is Foucault’s discussion of Jeremy Bentham’s panopticon prison, which Foucault uses to point towards a linkage between vision and power. Foucault’s original title, in French, *Surveiller et Punir* [“Monitor/Surveil and Punish”] reinforces this alliance between a surveilling gaze and an enactment of power. Michel Foucault, *The Archaeology of Knowledge*, trans. A. Sheridan Smith (New York: Harper and Row, 1972); Michel Foucault, *Discipline and Punish*, trans. Alan Sheridan (New York: Pantheon, 1977).

Being *in* common has nothing to do with communion, with fusion into a body, into a unique and ultimate identity that would no longer be exposed. Being *in* common means, to the contrary, *no longer having, in any form, in any empirical or ideal place, such a substantial identity, and sharing this* (narcissistic) “lack of identity.”<sup>66</sup>

Nancy proposes a radical reformatting of community; by stressing the active process of “being *in* common” Nancy indicates that community is always in negotiation. Nancy’s rendering of “being *in* common” has a particular political relevance as Nancy’s text is foremost a reaction against national discourses that produce Fascist subjects and nations, with political ideologies that deny or erase a subject position in favor of “ideal places” and “substantial identities” that service sustained efforts to subjugate others. In doing so, Nancy aligns his philosophy with the concerns of postcolonial thought, which seeks to, in part, destabilize assumed commonalities.<sup>67</sup> Yet Nancy’s move away from “communion” and “fusion” could also complicate notions of identity, which like community, is a foundation on which we formulate many kinds of analyses – particularly within the realm of queer studies. Think again of Nancy’s description of his relationship to another Frenchman, a relationship that might be based on a “lack of identity.” When others are subjugated or doled out an identity, community loses the “in” of “being-in-common” – thus rendering singularities within such formations as simply “being common.”<sup>68</sup> This has a direct correlation to leather communities in the 1970s, that for a variety of reasons, never significantly politically organized as a cohered identity category, or codified their

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<sup>66</sup> Nancy (1991), xxxviii. (Italics original)

<sup>67</sup> For more on this point, as well as an elucidating summary of Nancy’s *The Inoperative Community*, see Tilottama Rajan, “On (Not) Being Postcolonial,” *Postcolonial Text* 2, no. 1 (2006). Web.

<sup>68</sup> Others have taken up this rendering of “being common” as a point of political empowerment. I am thinking here most specifically on José Esteban Muñoz’s work on a “brown commons.” José Esteban Muñoz, “The Wildness of the Commons” (keynote, *WE WHO FEEL DIFFERENTLY*, New York: New Museum, May 5, 2012). Audio.



existences in set of demands and rewards within a public, political realm. They never lost their “in.”

To avoid becoming a cohered mass (and so running the risk of playing into structures that enable Fascist thought) Nancy positions communities as *always being in a state of becoming, forming and reforming*. For me this theory parallels Rechy’s character who is always in a state of becoming (and coming), through sexual activity. Rio’s lack of a static identity and the embrace of kind of continual presence through being-in-common (“I’m just here, and that’s all”) is one way of realizing Nancy’s theory of community.<sup>69</sup> Writing about communities perhaps necessarily ossifies some of this dynamism, eliding movements and improvisations which define a community. This has dire implications for anyone wishing to write thoughtfully about communities – as a central concern must then become (and indeed it is a central concern of mine) how to write histories of communities that honor the flux and looseness of coherency endemic to them.

In Nancy’s formulation communities are not organized groups with simply expressed political aims and purpose. Nancy insists that at the heart of community is the

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<sup>69</sup> Nancy is not the only one to think about the dangers of national communities, Benedict Anderson in his work *Imagined Communities* places the development of communities within the history of Modern life. The emergence of such entities (similar in many ways to Habermasian formulations of the emergence of a public sphere) relies on the concurrent dissemination of mass communication technology and the social structures that allow people to interact with one another in a politically expedient way. Anderson’s positioning of these growing nationalisms as imagined communities points to the tenuous nature of their coherence and proposes a deconstruction of the terms of their enactment. Anderson’s theory relies on the assumption that to formulate a national body/selfhood, individual subject positions must be erased, either willfully or forcibly – which corresponds with Nancy’s work in *The Inoperative Community*. The creation of legal and communication structures have dictated the channels through which this might be accomplished. Anderson’s theories draw on salient political theories, such as social contract theory, which anthropomorphize the state and heads of state as familial caregivers (takers). Thus the nation itself is coded (i.e. Fatherland), and singularities within such a nation have the political power accorded to children... strong in mass but weak as individuals. This kind of community privileges the many over the individual and thus begins to erase the self/singularity through the scrim of national pride, policy and power.

plurality of singularities. But what is a singularity? Lest one be tempted to make the leap from singularity to individual, and to the theories of immanence associated with discussions of individualism, Nancy strongly warns against this, "...behind the theme of the individual, but beyond it, lurks the question of singularity. What is *a* body, *a* face, *a* voice, *a* death, *a* writing – not indivisible, but singular?"<sup>70</sup> Even the individual (who by definition we might assume to be in-divisible) is composed of singularities and is constantly in flux. Perhaps the best example of this is how one can be comprehended in different states of being.<sup>71</sup> This, in turn, might mean that the individual functions from within, as kind of community – a diverse array of prospects and pronouncements (from within, from without) of identities, commonalities and differences. By defining individuals as composed of multiple singularities (a common, yet vexing, organization if there ever was one), a useful bridge can be made between Nancy's theories and the oftentimes contradictory things bodies do and say. Suddenly, we don't have to square Rechy's dismissal of leather sexuality as sexual theatrics with his overt empathy for imprisoned leathersmen in his other books. Similarly, in the 1967 *Tom of Finland* drawing the rear-penetration and frontal ejaculation, the central figure's role as both bottom and top, while presumably opposed processes, are bound together dynamically – they are-in-common.

Love is especially troublesome for Nancy because it carries loads of cultural baggage.<sup>72</sup> Nancy questions the language of love that intimates a conjoining of

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<sup>70</sup> Nancy (1991), 6.

<sup>71</sup> This is something that Nancy expounds upon in *Being Singular Plural*. "As for singular differences, they are not only 'individual' but infraindividual. It is never the case that I have met Pierre or Marie per se, but I have met him or her in such and such a 'form,' in such and such a 'state,' in such and such a 'mood,' and so on." Nancy (2000), 8.

<sup>72</sup> Romantic visions of love were questioned long before Nancy, one example being Shulamith Firestone who applied a Marxist critique to prevailing notions of love tying them to structures of family and kinship

singularities; the idea that two become one is dangerous to Nancy as it only furthers the likelihood that community will remain unquestioned and thus vulnerable to gross misconceptualization.<sup>73</sup> But even here, love has revolutionary possibilities too, “On the contrary, love, provided it is not itself conceived on the basis of the politico-subjective model of communion in one, exposes the unworking and therefore the incessant *incompletion* of community. It exposes community *at its limit*.”<sup>74</sup> Far from making love, love is unmaking.

John Embry, publisher of *Drummer*, writing an “obituary to a relationship” under his nom-de-plume, Robert Payne, details the end of a love: “The death of a love consumes both master and slave. What was is no more, to a point that one wonders if it ever really existed. The resulting stillness is deafening.”<sup>75</sup> My query here is how do we, as historians and queer scholars, acknowledge and make space for such a “resulting stillness” which would seem to indicate a community, posited as a love between two people, at its limit? In other words, in writing histories of communities – ones that are ongoing as well as ones that no longer exist – we become by default palliative caregivers, wittingly or unwittingly, and our decisions about how we represent the events, feelings and people we write about often runs the risk of ameliorating such productive stillnesses and silences. In this dissertation I want to build more tentative histories, leaving such lacunae intact by erecting tracery around their edges. I point to these kinds of stillnesses, for example, in the structural decision to stop my history of leather communities around 1984, not because leather communities ceased to exist, but rather

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which further capital gain directly tied in with a systemic oppression of women. Shulamith Firestone, *The Dialectic of Sex: The Case for Feminist Revolution* (New York: Morrow, 1970).

<sup>73</sup> Nancy (1991), 12.

<sup>74</sup> Nancy (1991), 38.

<sup>75</sup> Robert Payne, “In Passing,” *The Best and Worst of Drummer*, (1977): 63.

because of the emergence of the HIV/AIDS pandemic irrevocably changed the terms of history, community and sex. To elucidate this more clearly, I dedicate a number of smaller chapters to thinking about the projects of a number contemporary artists, mostly after 2000, which re-view leather source documents from the 1970s. There is a “deafening stillness” where half the 80s should be, where the entire decade of the 90s should be.

In reading Nancy, we might come to understand how a group of men and women who, say, attended a fisting party at The Folsom St. Barracks, can create a potent yet ephemeral community in the 1970s – one that temporarily unworks all of the baggage demanded by self-identifying communities to capitulate political or ideological positions to a larger world or audience, and in such unworking defies calls to a coherent history. Here, community is both shared with others and sometimes shared alone. This night of fisting has the capacity to leave extended tailings that can be difficult to document, trace or even effectively/affectively communicate. Attendance itself is a political move in the face of all other forces, while the activity of fisting is a remaking of the world; boundaries between bodies, eminences, psyches are contained one within the other and remapped, it is the movement of bodies beside one another, and in an interior and vulnerable place. To wit, the activity of fisting actually begins at the door, or even before that, when the fister files down their nails; regardless, a long time before a fist is ever inserted into a rectum. It also possibly lasts as long as a life lasts, perhaps longer, open to revision, retelling, nostalgia, and amnesia.

To attempt to describe the kind of community that existed at The Folsom St. Barracks or The Catacombs on any given night is to directly wrestle with the

impossibility of writing such a history, one which can't really be footnoted, squared or coherent. Thus the singular, easily understandable community is something Gayle Rubin rightly positions as a "myth."<sup>76</sup> "The question to the degree to which the leather community can be considered a community or subculture is similar to the question raised for gay communities in the sociological studies of the 1960s."<sup>77</sup> The attempts answer to such questions are rarely cohesive, as taking account of gay and lesbian leather communities (much less broader gay and lesbian non-leather communities), is to willfully seek out and describe a moving target. Rubin goes on to say about leather communities in the 1970s:

As is the case for gay communities, people who are involved with leather communities do not all have the same level of commitment. Some live within such subcultures virtually full time; others drop in for occasional recreational, social, or sexual purposes while living and working elsewhere. In addition, leather communities do not have the physical range, economic heft, population size, or social diversity found in the larger gay communities in comparable cities. In that sense, they are more "partial" and have a less "complete" institutional array. However, again like gay communities, they are far more complex than they were in the 1960s. In addition to the bars, there are many other aspects to the institutional structure of the San Francisco leather population.<sup>78</sup>

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<sup>76</sup> "People often speak of 'the SM community' as if it were a singular organic entity, a creature with a mind of its own and capable of willful action. This is a myth." Gayle Rubin, "Visions of Paradise: SM Communities (and their limitations)," *Cuir Underground*, (June 1995): 1.

<sup>77</sup> Rubin (1994), 208-209. It is something Rubin continues to remark upon throughout her publishing career, most especially within leather publications, such as *Cuir Underground*. "SM communities are much like other social groups based on random assortments of people who have but a few things in common. They have good and bad individuals, healthy and dysfunctional dynamics, and their fair share of saints, sinners, criminals, heroes, and ordinary citizens. People within SM communities do not necessarily share the same values, political opinions, or scruples. Many people come into SM communities expecting them to be better than other social groupings and expecting SM individuals to be better than other people. They are usually disappointed." Rubin (1995), 1.

<sup>78</sup> Rubin (1994), 212.

Rubin's contemporary Jack Fritscher describes leather "community" (his quotes, not mine) as "...dividing itself like an amoeba while defining new specific, and—for shame!—discriminatory identities under the genus *homosexual*."79

Nancy complicates, and in my mind, fills out the work of *The Inoperative Community* ten years later in his collection of essays, *Being Singular Plural*. In this latter text, he broadly suggests that the philosophical history of being, of individual subjecthood, is by necessity *being-with* – a relational position. The theoretical crux of *Being Singular Plural* relies on the multiple ways of reading and ordering its three key terms – being, singular, plural:

Being singular plural: these three apposite words, which do not have any determined syntax ('being' is a verb or noun; 'singular' and 'plural' are nouns and adjectives; all can be arranged in different combinations), mark an absolute equivalence, both in an indistinct *and* distinct way. Being is singularly plural and plurally singular.<sup>80</sup>

Thus the singularities that Nancy invokes in *The Inoperative Community* are by their definition relational subject positions. The destabilized singular is always enmeshed with an other.<sup>81</sup> Such a circuitous move is exemplary of the critical complexity of Nancy, who

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<sup>79</sup> Jack Fritscher, "Inventing the Leather Bar: Red Bulbs, Black Paint, Back Rooms and Public Sex," *Drummer*, no. 131 (1989).

<sup>80</sup> Nancy (2000), 28.

<sup>81</sup> This is not news to anyone, and is indeed foundational to feminist theory – as Simone de Beauvoir's hugely important *The Second Sex* posits the position of women as a class of individuals precisely on women's contingency to the "self", or perhaps "being", of men. Women are Other-ized. Nancy's point is indebted to de Beauvoir's analysis, and seeks to describe how even normative positions are contingent and (more) unstable (than they appear). Simone de Beauvoir, *The Second Sex*, trans. H. M. Parshley (Vintage, 1989).

often refuses to stabilize any kind of subject position (whether singular or collective). It is a point he reiterates often in his text.<sup>82</sup>

Why is this important for those who share the common concern of relating and writing histories of leather communities? Leather communities were and are (to some degree) considered to be outside of normative communities. One example would be academic discursive communities, which sanction certain branches and subjects of knowledge. This functions on many levels within academic institutions. For example, I have yet to encounter an academic institution that collects leather periodicals as doggedly as they pursue periodicals dedicated to film, cultural studies, art, and so on. Finding the limited amount of writings made by leatherfolks (including academics such as Rubin) has been a largely trying task of sifting and re-sifting through archives situated away from academic institutional structures.<sup>83</sup> And so leather communities already, by their very marginalization occupy a non-stable position, and the very writing of this dissertation necessarily contains an unworking and remaking of academic discourse around sex, community and history.

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<sup>82</sup> Here are four examples: “*The plurality of beings is at the foundation [fondment] of Being.*” Nancy, 28; “... it is also always an instance of ‘with’: singulars singularly together, where the togetherness is neither the sum, nor the incorporation [*englobant*], nor the ‘society,’ nor the ‘community,’ (where these words only give rise to problems). The togetherness of singulars is singularity ‘itself.’ It ‘assembles’ them insofar as it spaces them; they are ‘linked’ insofar as they are not unified.” Nancy, 33; “We are each time an other, each time with others.” Nancy, 35; “The ontology of being-with is an ontology of bodies, of every body, whether they be inanimate, animate, sentient, speaking, thinking, having weight, and so on. Above all else, ‘body’ really means what is outside, insofar as it is outside, next to, against, nearby, with a(n) (other) body, from body to body, in the dis-position... a body is the sharing of and the departure from self, the departure toward self, the nearby-to-self without which the ‘self,’ would not even be ‘on its own’ [‘à part soi’].” Nancy, 84.

<sup>83</sup> And this is a place where internet and informational online databases are of very little, if any, help.

## PALLIATIVE CARE, HEAVY FEELINGS

That communities don't exist *a priori* as whole and complete, but rather emerge, flux and fall apart is probably not a great surprise. But understanding the death (or disassembling, if the body metaphor is too much here) of a community as a necessary, and even *foundational* principle of community itself is not often fully examined. After all, discussing the break-up of a community delves deep into bad feelings - feelings that, as Heather Love explains in regards to queer communities and canons, are ferried away in the hopes of arriving at more pleasant, empowering representations of LGBTQ folks.<sup>84</sup> While Love describes this hesitancy within the discipline of queer studies, her method is also applicable in other contexts. When communities break down and end, the story of the community – up until its endpoint understood, falsely, as only a set of communal goals – breaks into a series of subjective and seemingly petty concerns.<sup>85</sup> I want to propose, like Nancy, that community is in fact predicated on its dissolution, and writing ably about a community's end is an inordinately difficult task, one likely to make everyone involved unhappy.<sup>86</sup>

One of the most interesting leather communities, and certainly one that had a long and healthy life *after* its disassembling, was Samois. Briefly described by its membership on play-party invitations as a “support group” for lesbian leather women, the group

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<sup>84</sup> Heather Love, *Feeling Backward: Loss and the Politics of Queer History* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2007); and “Forum: Conference Debates. The Antisocial Thesis in Queer Theory,” *PMLA* 121, no. 3 (2006): 819-828.

<sup>85</sup> This is a question dealt with deftly by Joshua Gamson in his article “Must Identity Movements Self-Destruct? A Queer Dilemma” which considers the fraught emergence of queer identities in the 1990s as tied to activist politics. That such identity movements are almost always “skewered” on the “horns” of the queer dilemma is, as Gamson notes, “inescapable.” Joshua Gamson, “Must Identity Movements Self-Destruct? A Queer Dilemma,” in *Queer Cultures*, ed. Deborah Carlin (New Jersey: Pearson Prentice Hall, 2004), 279-301.

<sup>86</sup> As one might imagine this poses very real problems to a researcher who wishes to stay in the good graces of those still living.



chiefly came together to meet, socialize, play and protest.<sup>87</sup> Samois' legacy is largely transcribed in their publications, *What Color Is Your Handkerchief?*, the group's first compendium, and the anthology *Coming to Power* which was subsequently distributed by Alyson Publications.<sup>88</sup> While these texts are not always easy to find, they present a kind of public history of the activities and eroto-political valences of Samois. But if we are looking for an overt analysis of disassembling, of the end of this community we must look elsewhere.

The frequent newsletters produced and sent out to the membership of Samois tell the discontinuous and rapturous story of the group's successes and demise. Mostly the purview of member and co-founder Pat (now Patrick) Califia, the task of compiling and sending out the newsletters occasionally fell to other hands.<sup>89</sup> The newsletters document the group's changing/evolving structure, the kinds and frequency of events, helpful hints on leather practice, calls to write articles for books or journals published by feminist

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<sup>87</sup> The structure of entering Samois was complex, an interested person would often be required to attend an orientation meeting and several general meetings before they might be allowed to participate in play/sex parties or other social events. In effect, the foundation of membership was an investment in the maintenance and survival of the organization. Masked by confidentiality, many members took up pseudonyms within the group and the newsletter – with the proviso that if confidentiality was given to “third parties without permission” that it would “cost membership in the group.” Samois [newsletter], March 1980: 3. Sex, drugs and alcohol were not permitted at meetings, but were highly encouraged at play parties and other social events.

<sup>88</sup> Samois, *What Color is Your Handkerchief? A Lesbian S/M Sexuality Reader* (1979); Samois, *Coming to Power: Writings and Graphics on Lesbian S/M* (Boston: Alyson Publications, 1982); Pat Califia and Robin Sweeny, *The Second Coming: A Leatherdyke Reader* (Boston: Alyson Publications, 2000). *Second Coming* was actually not a Samois publication per se, but rather a continuance in the name, or legacy, of Samois.

<sup>89</sup> When talking about Samois, I am purposefully avoiding talking about non-well-known members of Samois. The newsletters often did not include the last names of individuals a self-protective gesture. Gayle Rubin, Pat Califia, Carol Vance and Jo Arnone were all public with their founding and membership in Samois, and so I use their names freely. Most of these four writers have written on the life and history of the group itself. It should also be noted that Pat Califia is just as prolific as Rubin, and for awhile the two were lovers. Gayle Rubin, “Samois,” *Leather Times*, no. 21 (Spring 2004): 3-7, reprinted from *Encyclopedia of Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, and Transgender History in America*, ed. Marc Stein (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 2003).

presses, internal conflicts, and importantly, the ways in which Samois (and lesbian leather in general) were being discussed in other Feminist and/or lesbian publications. The newsletters, unlike those that were contemporaneously produced by largely gay male Motorcycle Clubs or bars, are gloriously process-y, employing self-reflexivity as a key strategy of community formation and maintenance. When a member had a grievance, it was likely discussed in backrooms, but also sometimes published for the newsletter readership, for other Samois members to see. Samois' acceptance and embrace of conflict is notable, exceptional within leather communities, and may be an outgrowth of second wave feminist processes of consciousness-raising and consensus-building.

Indeed, Samois logo visually references a feminist heritage [fig. 1.6]. Described as “a pair of handcuffs made into a woman’s symbol,” Samois’ logo was an expression of leathersex (rope sometimes forming the cross of the woman’s symbol) but also of the ideological affiliation with general lesbian and feminist organizations (i.e. linked woman symbols).<sup>90</sup> This was also true of some of Samois’ activities; Samois members often coordinated targeted infiltration and political protests of gay and lesbian community organizations (like the Gay Freedom Day Committee) so as to counteract what they perceived to be retrogressive and discriminatory politics, and used then-familiar civil rights and feminist activist forms such as the “sit-in” to claim agency and remain visible in locations where their existence and visibility were being threatened.<sup>91</sup>

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<sup>90</sup> Samois [Newsletter], April 1980: 1.

<sup>91</sup> The best example of this was the ongoing demonstrations, one of which was described by Gayle Rubin as a “mill-in,” where Samois members milled about A Woman’s Place bookstore without buying anything. The bookstore had at first carried and then removed from display the group’s booklet *What Color is Your Handkerchief* due to apparent complaints from other feminists who perceived Samois’ literature as encouraging violence against women. Initially the booklet was displayed with a disclaimer card that labeled

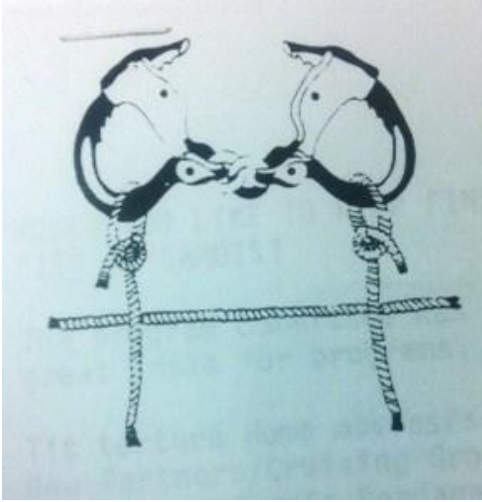


Figure 1.6: Samois Logo.

Their positions on their own internal conflicts and on broader political conflicts were sometimes surprising, though. For example, in the December 1979 newsletter, Samois is decidedly undecided on the William Friedkin film *Cruising* and the attendant protests staged by “gay communities” declaring flatly that “we don’t necessarily support either the film or the protests but want you to know about it.”<sup>92</sup>

Often Califia and newsletter editors would include cut-and-paste letters to the editor and articles from feminist and lesbian publications like *Plexus* and *Off Our Backs*, and papers such as *Gay Community News*, *The San Francisco Chronicle*, *The Village Voice*, etc. Samois members would respond to content they found noteworthy in these periodicals, and regardless of whether the periodicals published them or not, their writings would be reproduced in the pages of the Samois newsletter. The project of clipping and compiling had the effect of building an organic and time-based archive of the discussions across different kinds of communities with regard to the existence,

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WCIYH as “anti-feminist” and “misogynistic”. A report of this action, which included heated conversation, testimony and debate is detailed in the April 1980 newsletter.

<sup>92</sup> Samois [Newsletter], December 1979: 2.

practice and political organizing of lesbian leatherwomen in general, and Samois specifically. In newsletter from October 1980 the byline from a leather-phobic column is directly connected to a letter Samois received refusing to run a Samois advertisement in the same publication [fig. 1.7]. The Samois newsletter editor's handwritten comment is unambiguous and reads, "Just so we know who's who and what they think."<sup>93</sup>

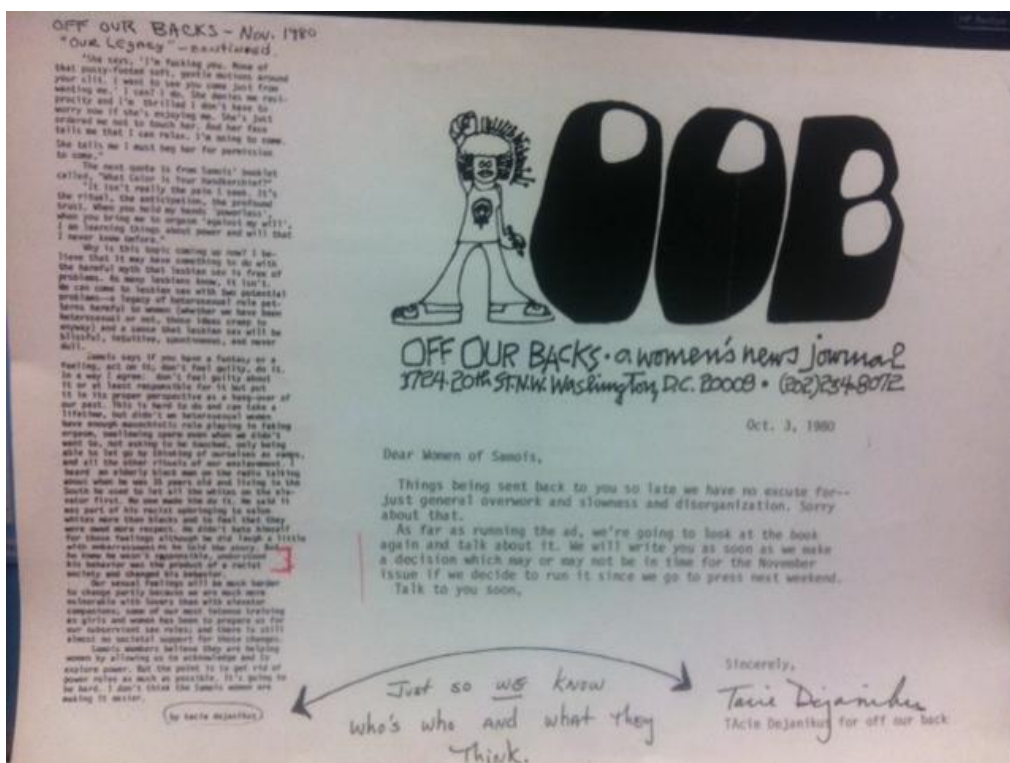


Figure 1.7: Page from Samois, October 1980 Newsletter.

Connections to gay leathermen and their communities are also apparent. An obituary of Steve McEachern ran in the October 1981 newsletter. The sweet and somber remembrance of the man who ran The Catacombs, a San Francisco private fisting club, is accompanied by the collaged visual of a solarized and hairy fist emerging out of a can of

<sup>93</sup> Samois [Newsletter], October 1980: 9.

Crisco, originally a design that appeared on Catacombs apparel [fig. 1.8]. The obituary, most probably written by Califia, details McEachern's life and death (from a heart attack while playing with his partner) and also names the stakes of acknowledging McEachern's death within the Samois community: "It is important to retain a sense of our own history, and remember who our friends were when Samois had only 15 members, and we got only a dozen women at a party. Steve McEachern was one of our best friends, and he is bitterly missed."<sup>94</sup> This is a key moment in the history of Samois newsletters, in part because it is the first lengthy obituary, and thus the first open discussion of death (a kind of bodily dissembling). But it is also important because it acknowledges the interconnected bad feelings of loss/bitterness coupled with the necessity of the maintenance and transmission of a particular history. That both are endemic to the principles of this lesbian-specific community is a testament to the political complexity and vision of Samois.<sup>95</sup>

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<sup>94</sup> It may be interesting to note here that Califia and Rubin at one point lived only two houses away from the McEachern residence/Catacombs. On a brief driving tour with Gayle Rubin in 2012, she pointed out that after serious play, sometimes she or Califia lacked the physical energy to make it up the hill two houses and so were welcome to crash in McEachern's space. I take this to be yet another signal of the deep affective bonds developed by Califia, Rubin, McEachern and Cynthia Slater.

<sup>95</sup> Cynthia Slater, a key player in pansexual leather communities, and particularly in the founding of the Society of Janus, was largely responsible for women gaining access to The Catacombs. By 1977 Slater had become lovers with Catacombs owner Steve McEachern. The first women's only part was held Friday, June 1<sup>st</sup>, 1971; the club often went unused on Fridays. Carol Truscott, "San Francisco: A Reverent, Non-Linear, Necessarily Incomplete History of its SM Community," *Sandmutoopia Guardian*, no. 8 (1990): 6-12; and Rubin (1994), 348-49. Rubin goes on to say that, "In a very real sense, SM lesbians learned how to party at the Catacombs. Lesbian sadomasochists were just getting organized and Steve made it possible for them to encounter a world of party and play technology that would otherwise have been inaccessible. The Catacombs quickly became a home and club-house for the nascent San Francisco lesbian SM community. Because the local group was instrumental in the emergence of organized lesbian SM nationally, the lessons of the Catacombs were transmitted to a generation of kinky gay women." Rubin (1994), 350.

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#### FURTHER ANNOUNCEMENTS

Honey Lee has photographs of the Leather Dance and Ms. Leather Contest at Ollie's. If you would like to see the contact sheets and buy prints, call her at 863-7408. Honey Lee is the photographer for I Am My Lover, a photo essay of women's masturbation, and she also does very fine, sensitive and original erotic portraits.

PAT CALIFIA is saving EGG CARTONS and OLD PHONE BOOKS. The egg cartons are especially important, and will be used to cover the ceiling of her bedroom and dungeon. If you are so inclined, you may collect a fee of one switch, smack or slap per each egg carton.

#### OBITUARY

Steve McEachern died on August 28 at 3:00 a.m. He was 35. Steve passed away while he and his lover, Fred, were playing. He died of a heart attack which may have been brought on by a combination of MDA and alcohol. Ironically, a women's party had been scheduled for the evening of the day Steve died, so many of you heard about his death hours after it occurred.



Steve's lover called the police, which is mandatory in situations like this. When the police saw the S/M equipment and whip marks on the body, they threatened to charge Fred with manslaughter. The coroner, Boyd Stephens, arrived shortly thereafter and told the police it was a simple heart attack, and there could be no question of charging anyone.

Steve's family subsequently refused to allow his friends to view his body, nor would they hold a funeral for him.

It is difficult for me to explain to new members of the lesbian S/M community just why Steve was so important because he had so much impact on me personally and on our whole community.

First of all, as the owner of the Catacombs, a gay male fist-fucking club, Steve had significant influence in the gay male leather/S/M/FF world. He often defended the right of women to participate in that community. As he put it, "where else are you going to go?" By opening the Catacombs to women's parties, Steve supported us in a way that very few gay businessmen were willing to do. Since we don't have a bar or bathhouse of our own, those parties meant a lot to me. Knowing that there was a place to meet other S/M dykes and get it on with them dramatically lowered the amount of sexual frustration in my life.

Because Steve died intestate, the future of the Catacombs is uncertain. There are tentative plans to reopen which may or may not come to fruition. However, the

(continued on the next page)



Figure 1.8: Steve McEachern obituary, Samois, October 1981 Newsletter.

Sometimes Samois would engage in the activities of political coalition-building as is evident in a report written by Pat Califia on a program meeting at which a panel of invited guests spoke about a variety of topics: bisexuality, cross-generational sex, sex work, transsexuality, and bestiality. Califia's recounting of the panel discussion ends with an overt affirmation of Samois' political beliefs:

But I would like to say that I think one of the wonderful things about Samois is our willingness to learn about the lives and experiences and political problems of other sexual minorities, and to think about the politics of sexual repression in general, rather than try to make a special plea that lesbian S/M (not gay male S/M or heterosexual S/M) is okay, but all the other folks with unusual sexualities are perverts.<sup>96</sup>

This kind of thinking can be seen in the thesis of Gayle Rubin's "Thinking Sex" as well, which seeks to find points of connection between sexual minorities or perversions – thus participating in a choreography of social movements through coalition-building.

McEachern's obituary foreshadows the group's own demise at the moment of greatest success – the publication of their first widely-distributed compendium, *Coming to Power*. Although the group had already published *What Color is Your Handkerchief* in 1979, *Coming to Power* was larger in scale and distribution, containing more original writings (both fiction and non-fiction) intended solely for the compendium. A review of the book in the feminist magazine *PLEXUS* chides the compendium, "There are too few non-fiction articles included and these few do not adequately address the crucial political questions surrounding lesbian/feminist S/M..."<sup>97</sup> This criticism only succeeds in

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<sup>96</sup> Samois [newsletter], Sept. 1981: 6.

<sup>97</sup> Kelly Eve and Deborah Ann Gaston, *Plexus*, (July 1982): 18, reprinted in Samois [newsletter], June 1982: 6.

underscoring the ways that some feminist communities saw Samois, and lesbian S/M in general, as being ignorant of the “political questions” PLEXUS, not Samois, found important.

The internal debates raging within Samois and in broader feminist communities are readily apparent in the June 1982 newsletter, one of the thickest at twenty-two pages.<sup>98</sup> Inside the newsletter are the characteristic mélange of clippings and humorous cartoons, editorial comment and recounting of calendars and business meeting minutes. This particular newsletter also contains a series of letters and responses from different factions within Samois – one from a member named Alyx which excoriates Samois for holding private play parties at a venue that restricts access to minors (then under-21). Gayle Rubin responds in print by pointing out that while many members are against such ageist restrictions, the arrival of minors to gay and lesbian spaces produces undue attention from Vice Squads looking for any reason to shut down gay and lesbian social spaces:

Anger about the alchohol and sex laws should be directed at the legislators who pass them, the cops who enforce them, the journalists whose sensational ‘exposes’ rationalize them, and the populace that applauds them. It should not be directed against the victims of those laws, which include not only the minors whose freedoms they restrict, but also those adults who are so savagely punished if they are caught transgressing, or aiding a minor to transgress, those limits.<sup>99</sup>

Directly reproduced below Rubin’s response is a short “Letter from the Business Meeting” (also signed by Rubin, Califia and six others) which simply reads:

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<sup>98</sup> An editorial comment at the bottom of page 14 of the June 1982 newsletter reads, “What the fuck - - this newsletter is already insanely long!” Samois [newsletter], June 1982: 14.

<sup>99</sup> Samois [newsletter], June 1982: 18.



The decision to print the letters which follow was a difficult one, much discussed by the business meeting. We were worried this would add to the complicated and unpleasant feelings that have recently afflicted the organization. But we hope instead that airing grievances and criticisms will be helpful.

We also need to say that the organization is in a state of flux, that it needs to sort out its priorities, and that it needs to find new directions. We hope that in the future our energies can be directed towards positive reconstruction of Samoa.

Candidly, the business meeting group discusses not only the difficulty of printing critical material but also reflects what they perceive as a group “in a state of flux” and in need of “positive reconstruction.” The goal is never to keep a status quo – to maintain an equilibrium – but to use conflict as a point of contemplation and enactment.

The first of the two letters is signed by twenty-four members of Samoa. The signatories of the letter self-identified as a group largely composed of “old-timers,” and they lay out a litany of complaints (thirteen in all) regarding the “high level of paranoia, tension, anxiety, and accusatory behavior between individuals and sub-groups within the organization,” “lack of limitations places on the powers of the newsletter editor,” “the treasurer’s lack of accountability” to those who loaned money for the first printing of *Coming to Power*, “overly harsh criticism” of the *Coming To Power* editorial board, “group acceptance of having men participate in Samoa program meetings, especially their participation in a sexual context,” “inaccurate... use of the word ‘separatist’... as an (incorrect) synonym for Lesbian,” “a feeling of competitiveness and elitism,” “unwillingness to take a political stance on Anti-Semitism”, and a “lack of day-to-day sensitivity around class issues” amongst others. Some of these criticisms concerned a perceived censuring of a few Samoa’s members. The list critiques almost every aspect of

Samois' functioning, from accounting, to meetings, to general atmosphere and use of language. The letter ends with a meditation on group dynamics:

Groups of course do change, needs alter, the membership fluctuates. Although we are unhappy with and disturbed by the organization as it is now, and specifically about the lack of a balance of power among the membersip [sic], each of us has reached a point of burn-out and exhaustion around trying to affect change from within. We sincerely hope that those who are remaining active in the organization, who share our concerns, will be successful in working for needed changes.

The writers of this letter are succinct in observing the changing dynamics of groups and communities, and in their own admission of burn-out. Although the letter doesn't make this explicit, it is implied in the final address to "those who are remaining active in the organization" that the letter represents the final thoughts of members who are divesting from Samois. The letter, then, is a document not just of grievances felt and expressed by twenty-four people, but of a wholesale departure of a significant portion of the Samois membership, which the same newsletter puts at 80-odd members.<sup>100</sup>

The response letter that followed was crafted by five members (including Rubin and Califia), near twice as long, and addressed an astonishing twenty-one concerns. These authors state that such a letter was "painful... to receive... especially at a time when Samois has such a back-breaking work load, distributing and reprinting the book, and when anti-S/M attacks are escalating within the women's movement."<sup>101</sup> Nevertheless the response letter goes on to address each concern in great detail. The authors of this second letter admit that, in fact, there is "a need to discuss and deal with class issues," but that,

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<sup>100</sup> "What Kind of Support?" *Playboy* (July 1982): 24, reprinted in Samois [newsletter], June 1982: 6.

<sup>101</sup> Samois [newsletter], June 1982: 20.

...it is inappropriate to condemn someone for using S/M equipment. Some of you have actually been seen wearing full leather outfits, which are not cheap. And many of you own cars or houses, which are even more expensive. In fact, you cannot tell what someone's class background is by how much S/M equipment she owns, nor is anyone's status in Samois dependent upon their collection of leather and toys.<sup>102</sup>

Other bullet points are just as direct: "We aren't the ones who seem to think that separatism and lesbianism are synonymous." Mostly, however, the letter is a careful and painstaking explanation of business and accounting policy – with a recurrent theme of chiding the signatories of the first letter for not being participants in the maintenance and running of the organization through attendance and voting at business meetings.

Like the initial letter, the response ends with a paragraph that mulls on the dynamics of the group and reiterates the opening sentiment of the letter,

Samois is in a difficult phase. Many of our old membership are burned out, the book is consuming most of our available energy, and there is a new round of anti-S/M attacks coming soon in the women's movement. We need new energy, ideas and support—not more bickering, back-biting, and gossip.<sup>103</sup>

Both groups of women in Samois relate the group as being in transition, "in flux" or "in a difficult phase," and both call upon a greater outpouring of good will in the same breath that expresses grievances.

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<sup>102</sup> Ibid.

<sup>103</sup> Ibid.

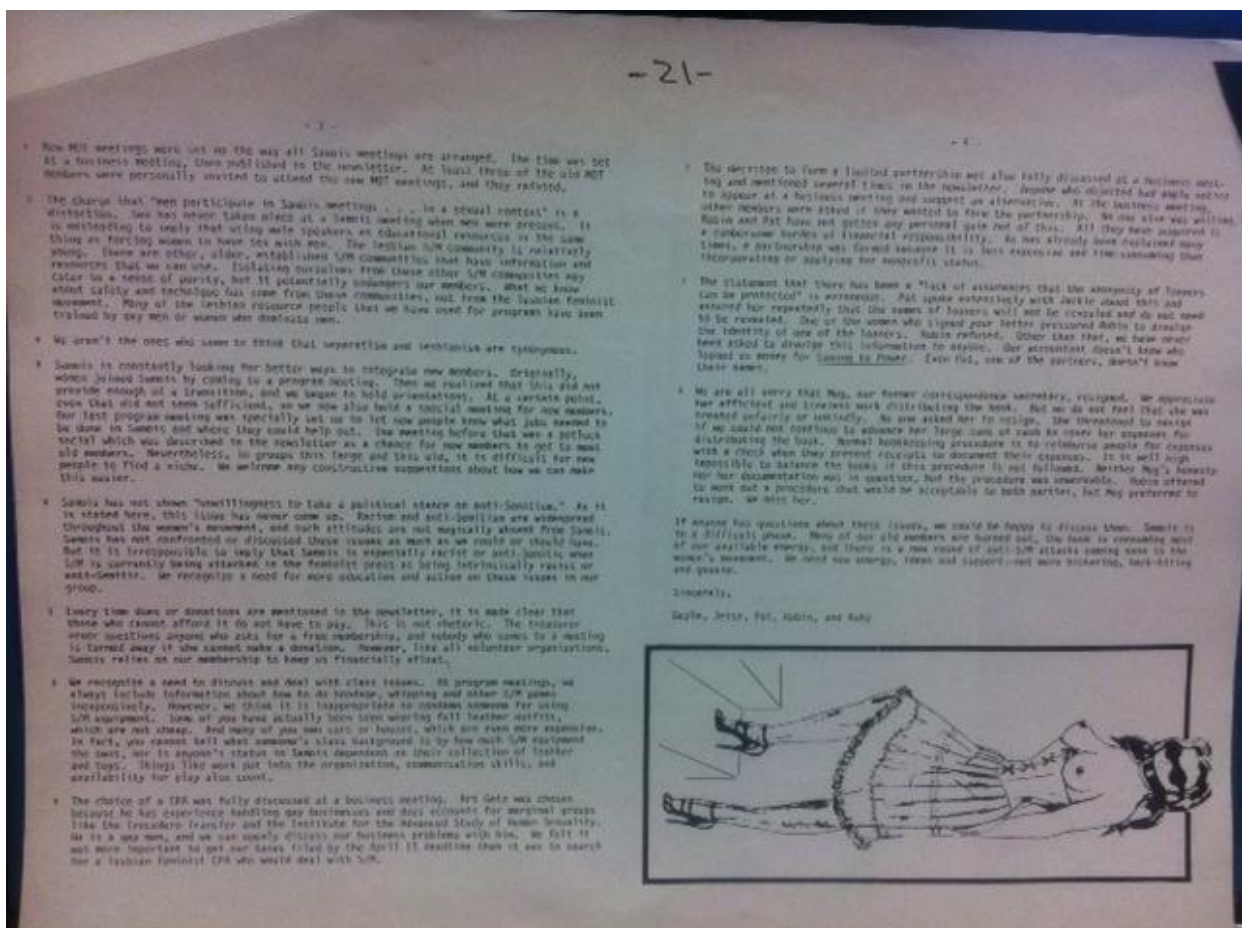


Figure 1.9: Response letter [with illustration], Samoia, June 1982 Newsletter.

The response letter is illustrated with an appropriated drawing of a bound and gagged, corseted and topless woman climbing a set of stairs in heels [fig. 1.9]. This type of image is not abnormal for the newsletter – oftentimes Califia would include images, collages, cartoons culled from Califia and Rubin’s clipping collections, wherever there was spare room – leaving very little blank space. But this particular collaged element provides an extra-textual argument, interesting due to the horizontal orientation of a vertical figure. Readers of the newsletter would have arrived at the page horizontally, as the previous two pages were oriented this way. This puts the reproduced image of the bound woman walking up a set of stairs in position of repose instead of active walking.

Her gagged mouth and blindfolded eyes, turned out towards a reader, communicates the erotic activity of bondage and of censorship. When a newsletter reader moves on to the next page, oriented vertically, they symbolically “right” the image, and coincidentally the movement up and out of the frame of the image is highlighted in its vertical orientation. The image’s placement after a call for “new energy, ideas, and support” and a reader’s enactment of “righting” the image would perhaps mirror the call for reorganizing and restructuring of Samois. In this way the combination of text and image is a mutually informing, affirming processes of change and reorienting. This reorienting is not dissimilar to the ways that Samois appropriated fetish drawings which appeared in heterosexual fetish publications such as *Bizarre*. Indeed, the image accompanying this second letter appears to be of this ilk. These drawings often depicted dominated and bound women, and were meant to appeal mostly to heterosexual men. In including these reproductions of drawings in their newsletters, Samois reconfigured them to speak to lesbian desire instead of heterosexist power.

To be sure, good feelings existed alongside bad feelings: a telling being-with. There is a swathe of documents that tell another story, exuberant and rife with humor. These are the numerous play-party invitations, often created by Pat Califia, for the women-only sex parties (which usually, though not exclusively, took place at The Catacombs). These invitations combined appropriated imagery and original text that, when amended/assisted by Califia, were searingly funny commentaries on the representation of women’s bodies and sadomasochistic practices. This aesthetic is similar to the one present in the Samois newsletters, but more condensed. One such invitation, from 1979, excerpts a clipped image from Rubin’s growing collection of John Willie drawings, in which a dark-haired Betty Paige lookalike grimaces as she binds the hands

of a blonde woman behind her back.<sup>104</sup> Dialogue is added to the image by the invitation designer, “Come here – YOU!” and “Oh no! – I didn’t really mean it – darling!” [fig. 1.10]. It is a heavy, yet sweetly titillating image; a good entrée to a play party which privileged both fucking and affective bonds. On the verso, the invitation text not only makes clear the practicalities of the event (who to pay, where to find The Catacombs) but also offers self-empowering advice for attendees, noting that while “group sex parties can be lots of fun. They can also bring up some heavy feelings/situations.” What follows is advice for those who may encounter such “heavy feelings” directly (“feel free to ask [the offending party] to back off”) and advice to raise the consciousness of the attendees (“be aware that the other people at the party are not putting on a sex show for your amusement”).

Another invitation from 1982 reproduces an image twice, once on the front of the invitation, and again in a smaller format on the verso [fig. 1.11]. The image, a line drawing of a cool, unaffected nun carting away a coal-eyed and dark-haired, topless shackled woman is accompanied by a quote from the San Francisco activist group The Sisters of Perpetual Indulgence, “There is no more sin. Guilt is dead. Enjoy your bodies!” This quote replaces the original text of the found drawing, which was a set of two quotes in French from the Bible regarding women’s roles and treatment. Underneath this second, smaller, reproduction is a fabricated quote from the creator of the invitation – which would be an appropriate opening line for a scene incorporating Catholic power fantasies, “Do you think saying 20 Hail Mary’s is going to get you off the hook for fouling out in

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<sup>104</sup> John Willie was editor and one of a host of contributing artists to *Bizarre*, a fetish and bondage magazine that was in publication from 1946-1956. While identified as a heterosexual magazine, the drawings often depicted girl-on-girl action, mostly for the benefit of heterosexual males. Samois, really Califia and Rubin, appropriated this straight and masculinist visual trope and imbued it as a powerful depiction of lesbian fantasy.

the last game with St. Ignatius? Bread and water is only the beginning for you, you clumsy tart!” This is Catholic schoolgirl punishment taken to its absurdly comical, and again, titillating, limits. This invitation text is even more specific in setting boundaries and limits for the play party. It suggests that party attendees should get blood tests to ensure that they are free of venereal diseases. The venue is listed as a “gay male fist-fucking club” and a brief schedule of men’s and mixed (men and women) parties is provided.



Figure 1.10: Samois, play party invitation, 1979.

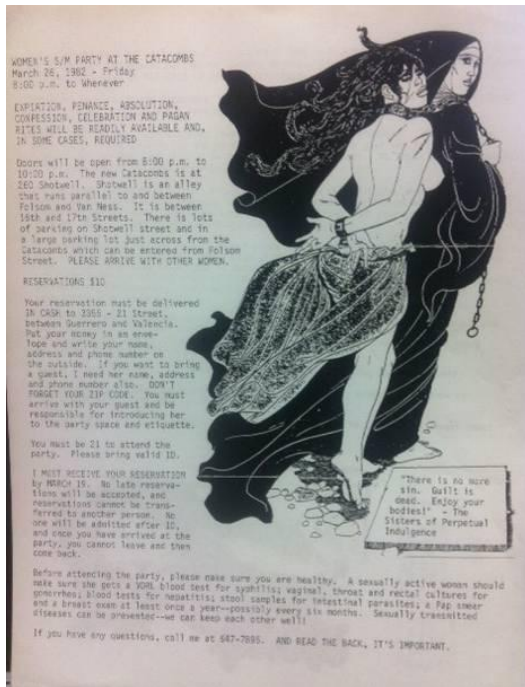


Figure 1.11: Samois, play party invitation [nuns], 1982.

When Califia was no longer in charge of making the event invitations the tenor and illustrative strategies changed – appropriated images were replaced with simple and wonky line drawings, perhaps drawn by the invite-creators themselves. One such invitation for a July 1982 party is supposedly formatted as a subpoena, a legal document forcing someone to appear in court [fig. 1.12]. The invitation-text quickly devolves from the concept, though, and includes quirky bits of dialogue from the invite-creators, Jan and Rebecca: “What!/? You didn’t tell me that!” “Quiet, Jan, or I’ll have to send you for the switch.” “Yes, Rebecca.”



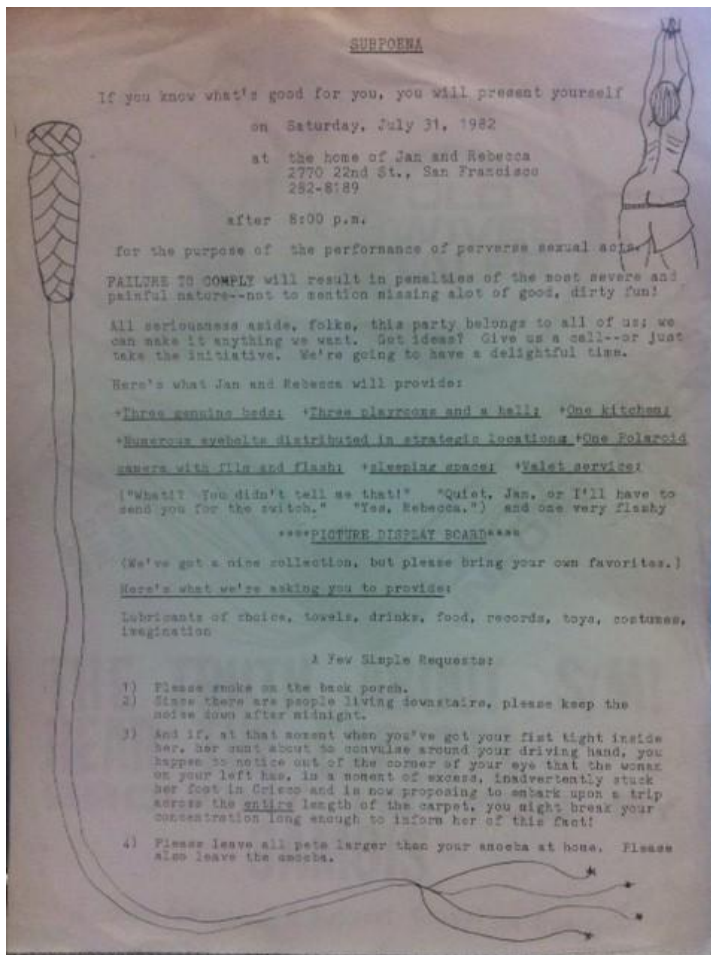


Figure 1.12: Samois, play party invitation [subpoena], 1982.

These three examples (there are many more) reveal Samois to be an active group in terms of event planning, but also a group, true to its lesbian-feminist principles, which makes sure that all activity is consensual and that women are informed about the nature of the space, event, and emotional triggers. In short, it reveals a community *taking care of itself*.

Self-care is mitigated through sex and processing – through informal gatherings with the express purpose to play and formal mailings. That disintegration sat alongside fucking is telling, and provides a model for understanding how a politically engaged

community attempts to take care of itself and, in the end, administers a kind of palliative care.

In spite of such clever uses of imagery, bad feelings, paranoia and anxiety remained, and the organization disbanded in early 1983, less than half a year after the newsletter exploring Samois internal conflicts was published. Often to minimize these bad feelings some speak in broad metaphors, death being the most common, “[Samois] was laid down in 1983 [...]”<sup>105</sup> To avoid recounting messy endings often historians move quickly towards speaking of legacy, that is to say the good things/ideas that carry forth into the future. Certainly Samois has a heady one; at one pansexual leather event I attended in 2012, Samois was name-checked about half-a dozen times within public ceremonies and smaller presentations. But we must also consider the affective legacy of Samois, which includes the bad feelings that discussions of legacies often avoid. Former members are still personally affected by the dissolution of the organization. They burned out discussing and dredging up the past, just as they were burned out working within Samois itself. The few women I interviewed regarding their own history and involvement in Samois found it painful to recount the demise of the group – often deflecting my question by pointing to already published accounts, preferring not to dredge up heavy feelings in person. And why should they? I am a younger (and male) interloper, and although ultimately sympathetic, do not have the first-hand knowledge of the formation, maintenance and dissolution of the group. Resistance to my questions, for me, indicates

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<sup>105</sup> Truscott, 10. I don’t mean to pick on Truscott here, whose article cited above is a text I’ve patterned my own after – her ellipses and emendations writing in 1990 are similar to mine. She initially worked on her article with Geoff Mains, author of *Urban Aborigines*, and in her preface notes how deeply his passing away (AIDS-related) informed the tone, structure and content of her essay. While she elides the passing of Samois here, her larger point is to build an architecture of important historical moments in San Francisco leather communities.

something about the distinct heaviness of bad feelings the dissolution of Samois engendered long after its dissembling, and it also indexes my own positionality – places me in relation to this history. It is community at its limit, which we might remember is also uncoincidentally also the site of Nancy’s bugbear, love.

It is here I want to return to Jean-Luc Nancy, and the ways in which he deals with a very personal loss - his particular words regarding the death (Nancy calls it “disappearance”) of fellow philosopher and confidant Jacques Derrida:

Thus it is, on the contrary, the *nonclosure* of this exigency and of the call or movement that accompanies it to which the reactions of the others bear witness, that is, of those who, whether philosophers or not, refuse to capitulate before the difficulties and risks of the present time. And, let me add, I am not just talking about those who have or who will have a positive relation to Derrida. I am also talking about those who, in their relation with him, put everything he says up for discussion, as long as it is in accordance with that genuine discussion of philosophers wherein philosophy finds its very resource.<sup>106</sup>

Whether discussing the death of a friend, or the very real possibility that death levels against the very project of understanding formations of community, Nancy admits here that there is little control he can exercise over something we might call Derrida’s legacy. That such legacies are contentious in the tradition of philosophy is part of the gamut. There is no closure at the moment of death, dissolution, dissembling, and if we’re lucky, there will never be closure in the years, decades and centuries to follow.

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<sup>106</sup> Lorenzo Fabbri, “Philosophy as Chance: An Interview with Jean-Luc Nancy,” *Critical Inquiry* 33, no. 2 (Winter 2007): 427-440.

## PARADES GO BY

In the pages of *Drummer*'s 30<sup>th</sup> issue, John Embry (writing as Robert Payne), looked back on four years of production remarking upon milestones in the young life of the magazine. In his column, entitled "Getting Off," he calls the first issue of *Drummer* "a brave little forty-page attempt" that had to be "sweettalked" onto the racks of local Los Angeles newsstands.<sup>107</sup> But it was not the first issue of *Drummer* that marked the beginning of *Drummer*'s readership, but rather "The Leather Fraternity, which started the whole thing..." The Leather Fraternity, different from Samois, could perhaps be best described as an amorphous membership club, whose benefits included, long before the publication of *Drummer*, adspace in a personals mailer along with the attendant ability to correspond with other people who placed ads (this was later subsumed into the format of *Drummer*), a subscription to *Drummer*, and a small discount for John Embry's photographic and leather goods business. This conflagration of pleasure (personals), consumption (subscription), and business (discount) marked a kind of formalization of leather communities, here imagined as a fraternity – a male-only space that functioned on the principles of brotherhood. The mentions of the Leather Fraternity outside of *Drummer* are very few, indicating that the Leather Fraternity was in some way synonymous with *Drummer* magazine. One telling outside mention comes from a *Los Angeles Times* article concerning the fallout from a bathhouse raid. This article describes The Leather Fraternity as, "a local homosexual organization."<sup>108</sup> Here it is homosexuality, in the eyes of an uninformed reporter, that is assumed to bind together the members of the Leather Fraternity. To those in the Leather Fraternity perhaps the reporter's description would have been laughable in its naïvete.

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<sup>107</sup> Robert Payne, "Getting Off," *Drummer*, no. 30 (1978): 6.

<sup>108</sup> William Farr, "Four Will Stand Trial in Hollywood 'Slave Auction'," *The Los Angeles Times*, Dec. 11, 1976: a27.

Even for *Drummer* this imaginative relationship of fraternity, that by implication excluded women, was patently false, as the first eight or so issues of *Drummer* were edited by Jeanne Barney, a heterosexual mother of two living in Los Angeles. Barney's tenure, in my estimation, was one of the richest in the magazine's history, synthesizing political events, personals, erotic stories and art. Barney and publisher Embry created a forum for leather consciousness-raising and erotic expression. But Jeanne Barney was not the only woman to be involved with leather communities that were publically described as male-only social groupings; as discussed above, Gayle Rubin and Pat Califia were well-imbricated into particular "male-only" leather community spaces and so were women like Viola Johnson (whose pin sash is the focus of my seventh chapter), Cynthia Slater, Jo Arnone, Dorothy Allison, Carol Truscott, Annie Sprinkle, Camille O'Grady, and Carol Vance. All played significant roles in the development and maintenance of leather communities in the 1970s and 1980s. Some of these communities were exclusively for women, like Samois, but most were not.

Embry's reminiscence ends with an expression of gratitude: "DRUMMER continues to be one of the few gay-owned, gay-operated national publications and continues to enjoy the support and loyalty of its segment of the community." Embry discusses this community earlier in his column, pointing to the fact that there is "an acute scarcity of communication in our national community." But what is this community of which *Drummer* readers are but a segment?



Figure 1:13: Screenshot depicting Gilbert Baker's rainbow pride flags, 1978 Gay Freedom Day Parade, San Francisco. Harold O'Neal Collection, GLBT Historical Society, San Francisco, CA., collection no. 2002-03.

One place where these competing arrangements between gay and lesbian communities and leather communities become clear is the organization and performance of gay (later “gay pride”) parades. The 1978 San Francisco Gay Freedom Day parade and events is an emblematic example.<sup>109</sup> The 1978 San Francisco Gay Freedom Day Parade was an iconic event to be sure, in part because it was during this parade that Gilbert Baker’s two rainbow pride flags were unfurled for the first time.<sup>110</sup> Far from being a

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<sup>109</sup> Phyllis Lyon and Del Martin Papers. GLBT Historical Society, San Francisco, CA., collection no. 1993-13.

<sup>110</sup> More work, admittedly, needs to be done on the relationship between Baker’s pride flag, a conflagration of colors each with a symbolic meaning, and leather usages of multiple colors in practices such as the hanky code. Since their initial display Baker’s rainbow flag has lost colors (pink for sexuality and Turquoise for magic/art), while the hanky code only aggregated more. This could be a symbol of the kind of winnowing and narrowing of LG(BTQ-sometimes) political aims on the one hand, and the expansion/growth of leather and kink communities on the other. Additionally, there seems to be an ideological difference in gathering colors onto a single flag - unity, solidarity across difference - and the process of flagging - separation and individuated difference in practices of leathersex. Key distinctions, often felt as antimonies, between leather communities and broader gay and lesbian communities could be mapped out in regards to the Baker’s flag and the flagging process of the hanky code.

small in-group event, home video from the parade shows Baker's flags flanking the parade route, and thousands of people walking and crowding the side-lines [fig. 1.13].<sup>111</sup> The footage also shows that the pervasive political statement that year was the anti-Briggs initiative (many of the marchers hold placards to this effect), a proposition following in the wake of Anita Bryant's political success in Florida to restrict gays and lesbians from being educators. Indeed, femme theorist and activist Amber Hollibaugh wrote of the 1978 parade (and complicated feelings of identification and disidentification):

It was 1978. The Gay Pride March that year in San Francisco was a passionate testament against Anita Bryant and the loss of an important gay rights initiative in Dade County, Florida. It was a reply to the frightening wave of antigay politics sweeping the country. People were at that march in defiance, protest, mobilization. It galvanized gay resistance. I was proud to be a part of it that year, angry and defiant about all the homophobia surrounding us. I was also full of inarticulate grief. The fundamental importance of gay liberation was unequivocally clear to me. But my desires, the ways I felt and expressed my own queer femme sexuality, now positioned me outside the rights I was marching to defend. My internal erotic identity made me an alien to the politics of my own movement – a movement I had helped start, a movement whose survival and growth I was committed to.<sup>112</sup>

Although Hollibaugh's "dangerous desire," as her article names it, is for stone butches, her words could easily be applied to those leatherfolks marching in the very same parade because, as I hope to make clear in the coming paragraphs, leatherfolks were made "alien to the politics" of gay liberationist movements.

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<sup>111</sup> Harold O'Neal Collection, GLBT Historical Society, San Francisco, CA., collection no. 2002-03.

<sup>112</sup> Amber Hollibaugh, "My Dangerous Desires," in *Queer Cultures*, ed. Deborah Carlin (New Jersey: Pearson Prentice Hall, 2004), 374.

1978 was also the year *Drummer* magazine had moved its headquarters from Los Angeles to San Francisco, and under the new editorship of Jack Fritscher, the nationally syndicated magazine began to represent San Francisco as the beating heart of leather culture. So it was, in part, that San Francisco was made to be (and continues to remain to a certain extent) an important center for leather cultural production. For these reasons the Gay Freedom Day parade and ancillary events in San Francisco in 1978 is a particularly powerful crucible in which to examine the interaction of leatherfolks with a larger “national” (read: gay) community.

A document from the 1978 San Francisco Gay Freedom Day Parade listing the “Main Stage Program and Participants” includes a diverse assortment of various “segments” of gay and lesbian leather community. The Emcees for the main stage program rotated and was largely composed of people who were directly affiliated with named organized groups or particularized (and perhaps essentialized) social identity categories, for example, “George Lee, Gay Asian Support Group” or “Jeanne Jullion – Lesbian Mother.” None are aligned with one of the *many* leather bars, motorcycle clubs, or support groups that were active in San Francisco at the time. Furthermore none of the performers, likewise categorized by which “segment” of the gay and lesbian community they illuminate (“Latina Salsa Band” and “Concerned Clergy”), seemed to have any overt ties to gay and lesbian leather organizations. For gays and lesbians in 1978 San Francisco, who seemed to be highly attuned to issues surrounding inclusion/exclusion and representation, the absence of leatherfolks on the main stage is striking.

While leather groups were not totally absent from the Freedom Day Parade itself, the marching order tells a similar story of marginalization. Out of 138 floats and



marching contingents only six (as far as I can tell) are directly or indirectly related to leather clubs, bars and communities. These groups were: Ambush, Inc. (bar), Boot Camp (bar), Society of Janus (pansexual leather group), Arena/Black & Blue (bar), Uniform Clubs, and San Francisco Blue Boys (club). All of these groups are relegated to position 130 and after.

A parade, as a visual and physical performance, depends on the good faith, health and energy of its spectators, wearing them out the longer it rolls on. Placing more “important” groups early on capitalizes on the high expectations (and the high interest) from viewers. It’s clear from the first ten groups that significance was doled out to those marching in the beginning and not the end of the parade. The first ten positions were dedicated to (in order of appearance): The Gay Freedom Day Committee, Gay American Indians, Disabled Gay People & Friends, Speakers [from the main stage program], Harvey Milk, Lesbian Schoolworkers, Gay Teachers and Schoolworkers Coalition, Butterfly Brigade, Bay Area Committee Against the Briggs Initiative, and the Northern California Alliance.<sup>113</sup> The first ten slots are relegated to the organizers, local political heroes and causes (Harvey Milk), groups who have historically been subjected to genocidal policies (Gay American Indians), educators, and finally a camp parody of a militia-format community (The Butterfly Brigade).

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<sup>113</sup> This is the first of many lists that make appearance here in the dissertation. The list is not just a way to organize information, people, groups – but more programmatically insert them into a hierarchical structure. It is also a method of empowerment, *Drummer* and many other leather, gay and lesbian rags would host community listings of bars and events giving the community an open invitation to the listed events, to say nothing of personal ads, which are mere lists, that seek to connect complementary sexual participants. In this dissertation I use the list as a tactical device, one that provides and evades certain kinds of information depending on the context in which they’re deployed. My chapter on the color Yellow for example is one big list, and it seeks to dissociate objects from a broad “master narrative” context, and so provides poetic possibilities for the writing and organizing of history.

Someone has to come in last place, and in the 1978 San Francisco Gay Freedom Day Parade it was leatherfolks. The following year, in the cover article for the December 27<sup>th</sup>, 1979 issue of *The Advocate*, Pat Califia, who was also a columnist for the paper, confirms that exclusion was part of the political message of the parade, “The Gay Freedom Day Parade Committee tried to pass a resolution that would bar leather and S/M regalia from the parade,” effectively excluding leatherfolks who wanted to be visible in their leather attire – arguably the very accoutrements that make them recognizable as leatherfolks.<sup>114</sup>

Lest one think that leather organizations were absent or “in last place” accidentally, the documents listing the order of performances on the main stage and the parade marching order, corroborate and reinforce that the 1978 Gay Freedom Day Committee was, if nothing else, responsive to thinking through the politics of community organization and structure. Citing these events, methodically organized and implemented in San Francisco, the exact place that Fritscher and *Drummer* located as the most important and largest population of leatherfolks, during a year which saw the continued growth and expansion of leather communities and aesthetic garments and attires (the “clone” was already an over-determined image in its use in magazines based out of San Francisco), is a clear indication of the uneasy relationship between non-leather gay and lesbian communities and leather communities.<sup>115</sup> It would be far from truthful to label gay and lesbian leather folks as a welcome subset of larger gay and lesbian communities. Such an alliance only considers the erotic activity of homosexual sex (whatever that means) as the essential binding agent. Historically, this was not so. That leatherfolks

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<sup>114</sup> Califia (1979).

<sup>115</sup> Fritscher (1978c): 8, 72-73.

marched under the banner of the pansexual group Society of Janus is a key part of Pat Califia's remembrance of that parade:

[...] our contingent was hassled by monitors who did not believe we had a right to be there [...] the monitors became hysterical about a lesbian couple who were marching together. The bottom had a ripped up shirt that showed her whip marks [...] The crowd was equally hostile. We were booed and hissed, there were shouts of 'fascists' and 'Nazis', and some people threatened us or spat at us [...] even the S/M people thought it was weird we were in the parade [...] and didn't understand why anybody would think S/M was a political issue. We also got a lot of shit from gays of all sexualities who thought that in the Year of Briggs we should all come to the parade in pinstripe suits and polyester pantsuits.<sup>116</sup>

The overriding narrative of the Gay Freedom Day Parade, in Califia's view, was one of tacitly enforced normativity ("suits" and "pantsuits"), and unabashed hatred for those who fell outside of this political stratagem of visually signaling normativity to combat the Briggs initiative. This is how, to repeat and transpose Hollibaugh's phrasing, leatherfolks were "outside the rights" and "alien to the politics" of gay liberation movements. Leatherwear and pantsuits were diametrically opposed forms of dress - Califia aligned each with different political goals, on the one hand the expression and validation of sexual difference, on the other the assimilation of homosexuals as "normal" (which here carries valences of a corporate, business-class).

Yet, being last has its advantages. The leatherfolks marching at the back of the parade were not the most visible participants to be sure, but they were the de-facto bridge between parade participants and street viewers, who upon parade's end could join in at the back of the parade. As street viewers joined the parade it was leatherfolks, who in the

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<sup>116</sup> Pat Califia, *SMart*, no. 1 (September 1983): 9. Carol Truscott corroborates Califia's timeline. Truscott, 12.

murky place between official parade line-up and improvisatory enlistment became the head of the parade. The rear-ended leather groups, thus, were in a position to build, if only temporarily, alliances between leather and non-leatherfolks.

I have so far touched on sex and community, as key terms operative in leathersex, group dynamics, popular writing, and continental philosophical thought. Through examining popular imagery (Tom of Finland), in-group correspondence (Samois newsletters and play party invitations), and public performance (the 1978 San Francisco Gay Freedom Day Parade), I have tried to render the ways in which sex and community were contentious terms, directly related to the ways in which leatherfolks were/were not visible to non-leather communities (either homosexual or not) within the United States. I wish to now add an important, and perhaps overriding third term, history, and in doing so draw together these terms to understand what it might mean to attempt to write a history of leather communities.

The Jesuit historian and theorist Michel de Certeau asserts that “all historiographical research is articulated over a socioeconomic, political, and cultural place of production.”<sup>117</sup> This *place* is twofold, indicating the place of the events being represented within the historical study and the place of the author doing the representing. Place, in de Certeau’s vocabulary is not just a geographical term (a physical place), but also describes the contextual meanings (an ideological place) ascribed to particular key terms. As I have already laid out, community, and the manifold acceptances and refusals of that term, represents an enactment of reading *placement*. In understanding the multiple

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<sup>117</sup> Michel de Certeau, *The Writing of History*, trans. Tom Conley (New York: Columbia University Press, 1988), 58.

contexts in which leatherfolks were/ were not (self-)identified under the rubric of community, I have tried to elucidate how community itself was a contentious, unstable, and telling touchstone in understanding how both leatherfolks and non-leatherfolks understood what community could be.

History, in de Certeau's estimation, is a manifold and multilayered operation, never the same twice. That the *placement* of historians organize "...a 'police' around the work" of history is one of de Certeau's key points. Such policing suggests that the ideological boundaries set by a historian necessarily limits the scope and political work of their history-writing. Thus it is not only the historian who is *placed* but also the audience; different modes of address help to construct differently *placed* audiences. For example, the audience of the 1978 San Francisco Gay Freedom Day Parade is not the same audience who reads this dissertation. So in writing history, a particular process of translation (often called interpretation) should also be described or intimated.<sup>118</sup> Such self-reflexivity is a hallmark of de Certeau's own writings on history, as he illuminates how history-writing "...*makes* the historian."<sup>119</sup>

This self-reflexivity is a tactic I take up in earnest, and have kept in mind throughout the completion of this dissertation. I often aim to be reflexive in my analysis, perhaps to a fault, not to avoid or ameliorate de Certeau's notion of placement, but rather to heighten such a notion making it more visible to a reader. For a readership accustomed to an "omniscient scholar-viewer," my work may therefore appear to be one long

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<sup>118</sup> de Certeau, 63.

<sup>119</sup> de Certeau, 64.

opportunity for self-examination.<sup>120</sup> Yet, this misses the operative principles of my model of analysis on a fundamental level, and the lineages of scholarship I claim. Reflexivity and placement is a hallmark of feminist and queer scholarstic models across a variety of disciplines, and involves a “radical consciousness of self in facing the political dimensions of fieldwork and construction of knowledge.”<sup>121</sup> Hopefully, the places where I insist on reflexivity helps to clarify something about the *process* of knowledge construction, especially in regards to a little-researched topic such as the one I have chosen. In this respect, this dissertation is a particularly vulnerable document, and values vulnerability as a key part of scholastic life. My work supposes that discomposure is as important as composure/composition.<sup>122</sup>

De Certeau is not alone in his call for a new kind of history. Joan Wallach Scott, in her essay “After History?” posits three traits of a new kind of history-writing; one that

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<sup>120</sup> I borrow the phrase of “omniscient scholar-viewer” from John Clarke, who discusses such a position as widespread amongst scholars and particularly unhelpful in discussing visual representations from Roman antiquity. At issue in Clarke’s analysis is a scholar’s self-positioning as completionist/expert when discussing aspects of Roman life where little evidence exists. I’d like to believe the affinities between our work is manifold - as this study, like many of Clarke’s studies, attempts to approach and make contextual sense out of fragmented and under-discussed sets of communities and visual representations. John Clarke, *Looking at Laughter: Humor, Power, and Transgression in Roman Visual Culture, 100 B.C. - A.D. 250* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2007), 109-120.

<sup>121</sup> Helen Callaway quoted in Rosanna Hertz, introduction to *Reflexivity and Voice*, ed. Rosanna Hertz (Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publications, 1997), viii. This move towards reflexivity is often found in scholarship where one is speaking to/about, or cribbing a phrase from Trinh T. Minh-ha, “nearby” an Other. Trinh T. Minh-ha, “Difference: ‘A Special Third World Women’s Issue’,” *Feminist Review*, No. 25 (Spring 1987): 5-22. Indeed, the similarities between Jean-Luc Nancy’s construction of “being-with” and Minh-ha’s speaking “nearby” are manifold, and so would be worth further examination. See also: Arjun Appadurai, “Introduction: Place and Voice in Anthropological Theory,” *Cultural Anthropology* 3, no. 1 (1988): 16-20; Judith Kegan Gardiner, “On Female Identity and Writing by Women,” *Critical Inquiry* 8, no. 2 (Winter 1981): 347-361; Wayne Koestenbaum, *The Queen’s Throat: Opera, Homosexuality, and the Mystery of Desire* (New York: Poseidon Press, 1993).

<sup>122</sup> I take a linguistic cue here from New York and Stockholm-based artist Emily Roysdon, who titled her 2012 show at The University of Texas’ Visual Arts Center *Pause, Pose, Discompose*. As I was the curator for the show I had a few conversations with Roysdon about the term discompose. Roysdon was hesitant to use it, but generally, she meant it in a choreographic sense, a kind of willful move away from composure or composition.

takes “*discontinuity*, not continuity or linear development, to be the operative principle of history,” privileges “*processes of differentiation*,” and “[*historicizes*] *interpretation*, understanding it not as a shameful distortion of objectivity, but as the very source of knowledge itself.”<sup>123</sup> Scott was reacting directly to what she saw as a pervasive notion of history as presenting or describing a fixed narrative. And so, by implication, an objective narrative truth should be directly accessible to the engaged scholar. If such a plumbline to truth is accessible, the thinking goes..., how could history be otherwise? Scott remarks that much to the chagrin of purveyors of conservative and, at times, reactionary history, it is pesky feminists, queers, and people of color who are productively destroying such notions.<sup>124</sup> I take Scott’s remarks as an open call for nontraditional histories which aim to seriously investigate the operative assumptions that many histories are built upon. Instead of tight, linear histories, I ask for histories that break, sputter and stop, that curl, wind and reflect, and are notable for their knowing inclusions of absences and lacunae. Reconceptualizing history in Scott’s terms severely handicaps historians who are looking for a coherence which, ultimately, may not even be there. This reconceptualized history becomes useful in assessing the shape of historiography at various Certeaudian *places*, making it easier to determine what or who is included and excluded from the process of history-making. Why, for example, is much of the (scarce) literature on leather communities in the 1960s-1990s, produced by writers who identify themselves as outsiders to leather communities and specifically within the academic fields of psychology and sociology? Why do so many begin with warnings to the reader, contain

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<sup>123</sup> Joan W. Scott, “After History?” in *Schools of Thought: Twenty-Five Years of Interpretive Social Science*, eds. Joan W. Scott and Debra Keates (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2001), 95.

<sup>124</sup> This is territory that Scott also covers in her article “Experience”, which seeks to counter the notion that experience is a priori historical context, or that context comes out of experience. Joan W. Scott, “Experience,” in *Feminists Theorize the Political*, eds. Judith Butler and Joan W. Scott (New York: Routledge, 1992).

detailed analyses as to *why*, psychologically speaking, leatherfolks *do* what they do? Why do these histories often end in either a resolute condemnation or apologia? The answers may have to do with a large-scale sociological turn towards deviancy (a category that already renders psychology an important corollary ontology) begun in the 1960s and carried out through the 1990s. That I turn away from psychoanalytic theory/texts is again indicative of my own *placement*, a moment of disjuncture between a past literature and my own present internalized initiative to look for new modes of description, empowerment, and engagement. Although, I should note, that many of the scholars I rely on - most notably Michel de Certeau and Joan Scott - have built rich and meaningful analyses out of psychoanalytic methodologies and so I am reticent to wholesale dismiss the potential gifts of psychoanalytic methodologies. For those interested in finding a lineage of psychoanalytic methodologies I would suggest that the echoes and reverberations of these scholars' engagements with psychoanalytic methodologies might be more readily felt in regards to the rhetorical aims and structure of this dissertation, but not really as a direct commentary on leather identities themselves.

Scott states what many of us might already feel: that history is not a place for finding comfort, but rather a place of immense unknowing. Her essay is far from a nihilistic treatise. The question of "why even write history?" is never asked by Scott. Rather, she presents an opportunity to begin writing histories that contain as many questions as answers. Perhaps more. Scott opens out a space for a way of writing history that privileges the place of *approaching* the subject/topic at hand rather than *knowing* it. It is worth reiterating that when writing the kind of history Scott proposes, as this dissertation attempts to do, the writer's position becomes painfully obvious (and self-



indulgence - an easy criticism), the goal being that placement for a reader is more readily available rather than obfuscated by academic generic conventions of objectivity.

Inspired by de Certeau's and Scott's call for ever-more self-reflexive and complicated histories, I want to further trace out the conceptual and rhetorical strategy of this dissertation. When a comprehensive history doesn't exist (as is the case with gay and lesbian leather communities in the 1970s) there are two options: to attempt to make that comprehensive history, or to deny the possibility. I've often felt in the process of researching this dissertation that I might as well be working as a paleontologist – the period is recent, but the documentation is often fragmented and scarce. I use *Drummer* and the relatively young institution of The Leather Archives & Museum to inform my understandings of the larger machinations of leather communities and visual cultures from the 1970s. There are other archives in existence, personal archives that were or will be thrown out and trashed by biological families who do not understand, or do not wish to understand leather communities and sexualities. In this way de Certeau's and Scott's proscriptions regarding the writing of history, for me, are inherently tied to ways of acknowledging structurally the very terms and legacies of alterity. If we as art historians/queer theorists/visual cultural workers base our histories on lacunae, broken assemblages of pieces that never quite seem to fit together perfectly, or if we live in the mess of history, then we begin to approach the political possibilities of a discomposed history.

I want to share an incident which clarified for me the lineaments and broader stakes of such a project. About a year into my research I was accepted to present a paper at an annual symposium hosted by my own department at the University of Texas at

Austin. The symposium's purpose was (and remains) twofold: it ideally provides an opportunity to honor academic work being done within the department, as well as serves to recruit/woo potential graduate students. My paper, most of which is enfolded in my seventh chapter, was subject to peer review from a more advanced doctoral student – vetting constructed to mimic a peer-review process and thereby professionalizing presenters. My reviewer, disturbed by the content of my paper, unceremoniously threatened to pull it a few days before the conference took place. After asking for corroborating written feedback from several of his peers, none of whom had any fluency working on material dedicated to sexual minorities, he laid out the terms of his rejection. At issue, apparently, was my use of the word “fuck” to describe sex acts that were neither “making love” nor “sex” in the normative sense, as well as the explicit images I would be showing in my visual presentation. The coarse language, visual *and* linguistic, of fucking, as the argument was made to me, had no place in an academic environment. Is it any wonder then, under such knowledge regimes, leather communities and their visual and material cultures have rarely been considered within academic disciplines (specifically here, art history)? In a particularly heated exchange, which had to be moderated by a third party, he finally asked me, explosively, “How much of this is you and how much is something you study?!”

His question was not actually about my work; it was about me.

The two are connected, obviously, but my identities do not strictly regulate the histories I write. And as some scholars who write from and/or on minoritarian identity positions know well, assuming an essentialized experience across a particular identity category, is a particularly pernicious trap. Remember what Nancy said about Frenchmen?

My reviewer's question ignored the fact that when we self-identify/are involuntarily identified we are often unavoidably placed in a position of un-easement, not necessarily within the social fictions of similarity which would seem to bind us happily together. Speaking from my own experience, as a queer scholar I invest my academic efforts in queer identities because the rewards of making these identity categories richer, less familiar, and more impervious to non-strategic essentialism is a worthwhile project. And the rewards can be just as great when a scholar looks elsewhere, beyond her/his/their own identity positions.

After I told him that I did not currently identify as a leather person, I insisted on an apology. Shortly, he dropped the complaints he lodged against me. In the end, the paper was presented, "fuck" and all, and was greeted with joy and affection. I have been surprised at how many times people have reminded me of that paper; something must have stuck. My work even prompted a comment from my antagonistic reviewer, himself gay-identified, that he was proud of me and my work, and furthermore, that I was to be commended for my bravery. I should have felt vindicated, but his comments were not validating in the least, especially because they were filtered through a kind of paternalism, as though I were still seeking his acceptance. But I think what he meant by brave, and I can't be altogether sure, was that I had somehow pushed *his* notion of what was acceptable; that through my work he had come to accept certain histories, and tactics of historians, as valid. Even so, he provided me with an impetus to continue. I am still both angry with him and grateful to him for that. I am fueled by these heavy and contradictory feelings.

The primary aim of this dissertation is not to make writing leather histories valid in the same way my reviewer initially sought – easy to swallow. My goal, instead, is to write histories that point out where signifying systems break down, interrupt themselves, mislead and falsely essentialize the kinds of identities produced within these communities. My hope is to further open out a new set of documents and communities, without over-determining the language which is applied to future studies of these communities. Instead of offering chronology, I offer discontinuity; in place of originary stories or death knells, I offer palliative care; counter to the seemingly codified front of leather relationships (Master/slave being just one amongst many of these codings), I want to insist on the messiness of these categories and just how beguiling they can be when embodied from multiple vantage points. The life-blood of leather communities is comprised of these very contradictions, spaces where meaning seems to at once cohere and break down, where secret places of penetration are slowly methodically (and sometimes sloppily) revealed. I often find myself in awe of the prolific nature of leather communities, and at the amount which has been left under-researched and undigested, the vastness and sparseness of particular archives. Hopefully a decade hence very different histories of this community will emerge, changing the valence of the content I present here. Such are the inevitable aftereffects of writing histories of communities and sex.

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I first want to comment on the macro structure of *Bound Together* before I attempt to briefly describe its interlocking parts. My dissertation is divided into eight chapters, four long-form chapters on particular moments/themes in the history of gay and lesbian 1970s leather communities, interwoven with four short-form chapters on

contemporary artists who appropriate, repurpose, and remake source material from 1970s gay and lesbian leather communities. In trying to discern an appropriate structure for a dissertation which takes seriously writing alternative histories it was important to me that instability was built into its structure. I see this as a playful invocation for a reader to engage meaningfully with my analysis, to attempt to build bridges across decades and ruminate on the ways in which the meanings of leather visual objects have changed since their creation. At the same time, I understand it will be frustrating for some. Telescoping between the past and present can be disorienting, and I am sensitive to that. Know that I have placed these long and short chapters in a specific order; sometimes the source material used by the contemporary artists I write about appears directly in the chapter preceding or following it. Sometimes the resonance is purely thematic, or media-specific. I am aware that I never fully explain why the chapters are placed in the order that they are, but I think an attentive reader will find room for contemplation there.

As a whole the chapters of this dissertation intimate an amorphous and large shape of scholarship on the topic of gay and lesbian leather communities. Unbound from, but in dialogue with, traditional narrative strategies (most explicitly, chronology), the dissertation is an opportunity to read through and to rethink the terms under which histories are presented. However it may seem, my analysis is not aleatory, dependent upon luck or chance; the alternatives I present are deeply informed by historical contexts of the 1970s, and the ways in which these contexts continue to “live” in a contemporary world. The histories contained within specific chapters are not shocking or utterly unrecognizable as histories (what would be the point in that?), yet taken as a whole, I hope the dissertation is difficult to describe – thus mirroring a difficulty in approaching and reading images and documents of 1970s gay and lesbian communities. From the very

beginning, I have conceived of this as an entire-work, and not really a series of article-length chapters. And though I am the first to call for dis-order, the chapters are meant to be read in order, and a reader is meant to carry the discussions of previous chapters into the analyses of the succeeding ones.

I pull knowingly on an eclectic group of sources. In this chapter, for example, I have referenced Jean-Luc Nancy, John Rechy, Gayle Rubin, Michel de Certeau and Joan Scott. A motley crew, and none art historians, my own avowed discipline. In doing this I hope to introduce my art historian peers to these exciting writers, theorists and scholars. At the same time, and taking a broader view of *Bound Together*, I wish to introduce queer and feminist scholars to the myriad ways in which visual objects can be placed meaningfully at the center of historical analysis. This is part of an overt and personal commitment to interdisciplinary work, as I believe each of these authors can have great import to a substrate of both art historical and queer scholarship. In relying on these varied writers alongside my own training reading and teaching visual material (acquired through my study within the discipline of art history) I enact my own desire for eclecticism in scholarship, even while attempting to produce a document that is meant to resonate differently within particular disciplines - queer studies and art history.

Yet having an eclectic theoretical base does not mean I place close-looking aside. Take this introductory chapter as an example, the 1967 drawing by Tom of Finland frames out the beginning and ending of my argument. I remain committed to *visual* documents and modes of apprehension - even when it is *process of visual apprehension*

that is being described.<sup>125</sup> In my years of research on leather communities I understand the ways in which visual culture (drawings in magazines, vestments, photography, pin sashes, movies, posters, bar architecture) is perhaps the most important component of identifying leather communities. These are communities which consistently signal visually, and furthermore, are historical innovators in the visual realm.

Archives, and the processes of making and reading archives, are also primary subjects in *Bound Together*. Chapter three is a compilation of a number of appearances of the color “yellow” in the archives of the Leather Archives & Museum in Chicago, IL, where I spent a summer researching and volunteering. In presenting the archival material I found there I had to decide what kind of narrative I wanted to tell. Whereas narrative is commonly taken to mean, “the organization of material in a chronologically sequential order and the focusing of the content into a single coherent story, albeit with sub-plots,” I try to expand narrative to include an asynchronous and strategic essentialism which requires the active work of the reader to either imagine alternative binding structures or to let the narrative remain unresolved.<sup>126</sup> In doing this, I actually rehearse a key

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<sup>125</sup> Here’s a confession: initially I consciously avoided discussing Tom of Finland. To me, focusing any part of my dissertation on Tom of Finland’s work would only reiterate what I perceived to be the current place accorded to him, as a highly visible artist through which one might synecdochically understand leather communities. Under such a penumbra, leathersmen (leatherwomen are conspicuously absented) signify hypersexuality through big, throbbing dicks. I have tried to take this historiographic operation to task and twist it, resting my analysis on a drawing never to my knowledge circulated during the 1970s, which visually and symbolically renders the assumed interest in phallic largeness a false front – or at the very least, one of many ways to read Tom of Finland’s work.

In the process of completing this task I have also built out an archive (those eclectic writers alongside the eclectic subjects of this first chapter) that, in the end, appears to me as a temporary and uneasy alliance between mostly dissimilar ideas and things. In one iteration of this chapter I attempted to align the topics under consideration under the rubric of “Rear Ends.” While I still think the description is appropriately cheeky, it also flattens out these subjects’ diversity and difference, the true focus of this chapter, by privileging something about their similarity – the rear end of a drawn figure, the rear end of a political group, the rear end of a parade.

<sup>126</sup> Lawrence Stone, “The Revival of Narrative: Reflections on a New Old History,” *Past and Present*, no. 85 (Nov. 1979): 3.

methodology of art history - iconology, or the study of sited and contextual meanings of works of art - and so I take note from Erwin Panofsky's seminal introduction to his *Studies in Iconology*. What may at first appear to be an engagement with the "pure form" of the color yellow, and thus begins with the first and most basic stratum of Panofsky's iconographic analysis, or primary subject matter, my third chapter is meant to engage across Panofsky's tri-partate strata in order to arrive at multiple intrinsic meaning(s). Indeed, "in whichever stratum we move, our identifications and interpretations will depend on our subjective equipment, and for this very reason will have to be corrected and controlled by an insight into historical processes the sum total of which may be called *tradition*."<sup>127</sup> Although chronologically out-of-order, the third chapter outlines a development and reinforcement of a *traditional* multivalent usage of the color yellow, through its close association with a number of erotic acts and accoutrements. Leathersex may not be a traditional subject within art history, but this does not mean that leather communities are without visual tradition. I start with a discomposed iconographic analysis of the color yellow in order to move towards a stronger synthesis and integration of visual analysis in the succeeding long-form chapters. In this way the succession of the long-form chapters intimates a particular process of research: archival work, description, ordering.

The third chapter comes on the heels of the second chapter which explores how contemporary artist Christian Holstad *arrives* at chronology instead of taking it for granted as the default way of ordering history. In relation to Holstad's tacit engagement with ordering history, I wanted to develop another organizational schema outside of chronology. By leaving the various documents I include unthreaded by chronology (there

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<sup>127</sup> Erwin Panofsky, *Studies in Iconology* (Boulder, CO: Westview Press, 1967), 16. Italics original.



are breaks but no transitions), I hope that a reader comes to experience a particular kind of deep archival (in)coherence, as well as connect with a kind of touching and shuffling of archival material. What emerges in the ordering and repetition of documents is a disjunctive narrative about a set of bodily operations (pissing), drugs and soporifics (poppers and beer), signaling systems (hanky codes), and architectural spaces (lighting in leather bars).

Such a frenzied and heterogeneous archive is placed in contrast to the subject of my seventh chapter, which is concerned with the density of one significant part of Viola Johnson's archive, her pin sash. Johnson's pin sash is an object that is *also* an archive. Here the various stories that Johnson, a contemporary leatherwoman, tells are filtered through personal experience and reminiscences, as well as my own independent research outside of our conversations. Although we didn't sit down and write the chapter together, I feel my claims to sole authorship of this particular chapter are importantly and radically mitigated by the overt inclusion of Johnson's voice (sometimes stretching pages). In fact, multiple archives are referenced in the seventh chapter, Johnson's childhood library in Rossell, New Jersey, the travelling Carter/Johnson Library, and most importantly her leather pin sash that archives and displays hundreds of pins and the attendant bonds told through personal stories of acquisition, retrieval, and play. There is no doubt that Johnson is a beloved interlocutor in my own process of research, and it would be disingenuous to pretend otherwise. In seeking to highlight this aspect of our interaction, I hope to underline the ways in which research is contingent upon relationships - in a similar way that Johnson iterates history is contingent upon people and not events. Because Johnson was, in a very real sense, the starting point of my research for this dissertation I wanted to place her chapter near the end of *Bound Together* so that her pin sash appropriately

enframes my work. Again, I seek not critical distance of the omniscient scholar-viewer, but a kind of critical closeness or nearness.

Alongside archives, my own subjective “hand” provides a way of organizing the histories I present in *Bound Together*. In the fourth chapter, I read Dean Sameshima’s large appropriations of erotic connect-the-dots activities that first appeared in *Drummer* magazine through the physical activity of literally connecting-the-dots. This personal experience, juvenile and fraught, is set against the ways in which Sameshima’s work has been critically understood as an analog to Sameshima’s biography and sexual interests. In harnessing a personal form of address while also critiquing the over-determined place loss and grief is assumed to play in Sameshima’s work, I seek to open out the field of future sexual possibility rather than ossify or eulogize an irrevocably lost leather past. Indeed, many of the contemporary chapters are meant to perform similar work, insisting on the ways that 1970s leather communities continue to matter and be remade.

The fifth chapter is mainly concerned with the various descriptions and orderings of Fred Halsted’s 1972 film *L.A. Plays Itself*, as well as the performance of Halsted’s relationship with longtime sex and business partner Joseph (Joey) Yale. The chapter begins with a set of three descriptions of the film – and by chapter’s end I proffer two of my own. One of these descriptions seeks to formally describe the action of the film, interpolating paragraphs of research with a seemingly objective description. The second description is concerned with my excitement and anxiety watching *L.A. Plays Itself* for the first time in the Museum of Modern Art in New York. This second description is still a section of my dissertation that is difficult for me to read – I am embarrassed by it as much as one could possibly be. But importantly, I think, it provides a kind of self-portrait

in the early stages of research, and thus allows for a reader to understand one aspect of the construction of this dissertation.

The sixth chapter on AK Burns and AL Steiner's 69-minute long art-porn, *Community Action Center*, is perhaps the most self-avowed political work in the dissertation. To write about the film is to confront the ways in which divergent and sometimes incompatible histories can be made meaningful to each other again and again. Pulling equally from filmmakers like Fred Halsted and writers like Monique Wittig, *Community Action Center* reformats the terms of its source material. I concentrate not only on the content of the video itself, but the first three installations of the film. In each instance of the film's exhibition AK Burns and AL Steiner created a series of wall-based and sculptural works that preceded a viewer's experience of *CAC*. Therefore the artists insisted on the possibility of remaking experience of viewing *CAC*, and thus implicitly call for the continual growth and maintenance of this particular work. The political implication is that *CAC*, and perhaps by logical extension queer histories and modes of fucking, are rarely fixed.

My final chapter is dedicated to the work of Monica Majoli, and it is through her work that I came to understand the political and personal import of the work of this dissertation. Majoli, whose artistic output is limited to a handful of paintings and watercolors, often organizes her series around moments of personal and impersonal loss. Highly informed by the experience of living with the HIV/AIDS pandemic, Majoli's work provides an opportunity to reflect on the meanings of such losses and the ways that they can productively reformat and remake the very terms and conditions of community as a multi-bodied enterprise. This chapter marks the entire dissertation as a post-onset

document. While I never truly dedicate a chapter to the myriad ways that leather communities responded to the HIV/AIDS pandemic, the flags of the pandemic are everywhere. Majoli, who productively uses the term surrogacy to remark on the ways she understands herself through others, is ultimately a surrogate for me in a similar fashion.

## **ASS, MAN**

To conclude I'd like to return to Tom of Finland, because the ways in which Tom of Finland currently appears (in 2012) in popular culture and museological contexts tells me something about the current process of the placement of Tom of Finland in the popular imaginary of art history. As I mentioned in the beginning of this chapter, Tom of Finland was, no doubt, one of the most popular artists within leather communities in the United States in the 1970s – his work appears in many leather publications and the interiors of many leather bars, whether legally sanctioned or not. But there is a problem in identifying his work as the *most* important simply due to its popularity. Such a demarcation and process of vaunting has the capacity to unproductively flatten out the variety and vitality of the visual productions of dozens of other artists also working with leather imagery from within leather communities. We already see the effects of this isolated lionizing, or tokenizing, of Tom of Finland. A company called Dirty Linens marketed sets of drinking glasses and linens and bedsheets that featured Tom of Finland drawings in a toile-like pattern, sold at hefty prices in the early 2000s [fig. 1.14]. The art-book publisher Taschen has now published no fewer than four titles on Tom of Finland, each more extensive, and *expensive*, than the last [fig. 1.15]. Their most recent effort, entitled *XXL*, a title that refers to the endowment of the cocks in Tom of Finland's drawings as much as it does the size and format of the book itself, is available at the unaffordable, for many, price of \$200. Of concern to me, particularly, is the tight-knit

association between Tom of Finland's burgeoning importance beyond leather contexts to highly-priced consumable goods. Even the Museum of Modern Art has accessioned Tom of Finland drawings, including them in a recent exhibition of drawings from the permanent collection.<sup>128</sup> That household goods, book publications, and the walls of MoMA are emblazoned with Tom of Finland drawings index a cultural importance currently in negotiation around Tom of Finland's work. Because Taschen or MoMA do not (yet) carry titles or works concerned with any of the numerous other leather artists, suggests a mid-point in the process of tokenizing/lionizing – in effect making Tom of Finland serve as the emblem or ambassador of leather culture and art. Perhaps even of gay culture and art more broadly!

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<sup>128</sup> Tom of Finland was exhibited in two major MoMA drawing shows: *Glossolalia: Languages of Drawing* (2008) and *Compass in Hand: Selections from the Rothschild Foundation Collection* (2009). The five drawings now owned by MoMA were part of a larger gift of drawings from the Judith Rothschild Foundation in 2006.



Figure 1.14: Dirty Linens, Pillow [Tom of Finland Toile], c. 2000s.

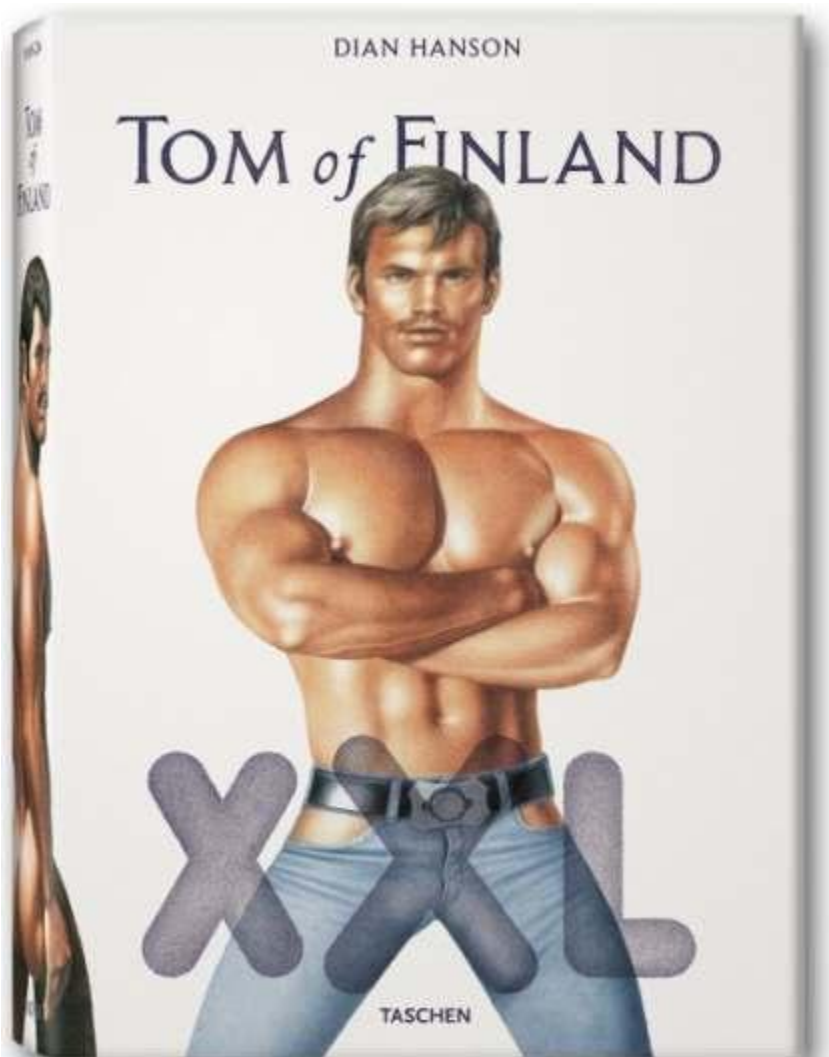


Figure 1.15: Dian Hansen [ed.], *Tom of Finland: XXL* [cover], Taschen, 2009.

There are a couple problems with this emblemizing of Tom of Finland. The first is that not all leatherfolks thought Tom of Finland was the cream of the artistic crop. For example, one of Tom of Finland's contemporaries, a writer who identifies himself as a personal friend of the artist denies a "serious assessment" of Tom, calling such an approach "quite irrelevant," preferring instead to describe Tom of Finland as "a superb entertainer" as his "pictures don't pretend to be great art."<sup>129</sup> This is actually a position

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<sup>129</sup> Orsen, "An Appreciation: Tom of Finland," *Queen's Quarterly* 4, no. 1 (Jan./Feb. 1972): 14-21.

that Tom of Finland repeated himself, in personal correspondence.<sup>130</sup> What I mean to suggest is not that Tom of Finland wasn't "great," but that in placing Tom of Finland in such a category we, as art historians and visual cultural historians, only reiterate master narratives that place "great men" at the center of visual/historical scholarship.<sup>131</sup> This is the second problem in lionizing Tom of Finland in isolation from the cultural contexts which produced Tom of Finland as the most popular leather image-maker.

These relatively recent trends in reception also get elided with representations of historical gender roles, particularly historical masculinities, as one biography of Tom of Finland semantically combines the artist's drawings with flesh-and-blood leathermen: "These are real men, men's men, Tom's men."<sup>132</sup> The intimation is that all leathermen in the 1970s tried to be or ape Tom of Finland drawings.<sup>133</sup> That can be a myopic view – one that essentializes complicated historical relationships between social organizations and visual images that I've already discussed. All this is to say that Tom of Finland has become a kind of shorthand in institutions such as MoMA, with the authority and opportunity (read: privilege), to make decisions as to what counts as an acceptable

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<sup>130</sup> A letter dated April 17<sup>th</sup>, 1974, from Tom of Finland to Etienne (Dom Orejudos) indicates that the Finnish artist admired the figures drawn by the Chicago-based Orejudos:

"Dear Dom, Thank you for the great collection of your art, which you sent me! Such strong feeling, virile fantasy, wild action, exciting positions, masculine faces and bodies – simply: you are superb! I find my own production very tame, pale and stiff compared to yours. Still I send you here some prints to thank you for the great thrill you have given to me. Sincerely yours, Tom." Dom Orejudos (Etienne) Papers, Leather Archives & Museum, Chicago, IL.

<sup>131</sup> Linda Nochlin, "Why Have There Been No Great Women Artists?" *ARTNews* (January 1971): 22-39, 67-71. Nochlin's article was a clarion call for the usefulness of a burgeoning feminist methodology in art history inasmuch as such an analysis could challenge the very foundations of a discipline (read: the gendered notion of "greatness" itself). Remarkable (and dispiriting) to me is how Nochlin's analysis still applies to a contemporary landscape of visual scholarship and exhibition-making.

<sup>132</sup> F. Valentine Hooven (III), *Tom of Finland: His Life and Times* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1993), 2.

<sup>133</sup> To mention nothing of the claim that there might exist such a thing as a "real" man.



emblem of leather culture (or perhaps more cynically, a synecdoche of gay male culture writ large) to an assumed non-leather audience.

Instead, Tom of Finland should be one pixel of a larger, more complex picture, one that includes artists such as Sean (John Klamik), Etienne (Dom Orejudos), A Jay (Al Shapiro), Rex, Camille O'Grady, Jackal, Robert Opel, Bill Ward, The Hun, Bill Tellman, Steve Masters; producers and editors such as Jeanne Barney, John Embry, Chuck Renslow; filmmakers and actors such as Fred Halsted and Joey Yale; organizations such as Samois, The Society of Janus, the FFA, Golden Showers Association; clubs and bars like the Gold Coast, The Mineshaft, The Catacombs, The Ramrod(s), The Ambush; cultural practices of pinning, pissing, flagging, flogging and most importantly fucking. Oh, and hugging is there too.

While Tom represents the front, the most visible aspect of historic leather communities to date, I wish to privilege the back; to privilege the hands reaching towards the ass in the 1967 drawing I began with.

Even Tom admitted that the big cocks were for the “other guys” and that he considered himself, instead, an “ass man.”<sup>134</sup>

In this way he let his own discourse betray what he was doing.

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<sup>134</sup> Durk Dehner, “Tom of Finland: A Personal Remembrance,” *Tom of Finland Foundation*, n.d. Web. Accessed June 6, 2012.

## Chapter 2: Chronology, Not Apology

Three blocks from Grand Central station in New York City, just a short walk from where many leather bars were located in the 1970s, a shut-down Mediterranean deli was transformed for a little while in 2006 into Leather Beach, an itinerant fictional place created by the artist Christian Holstad. Leather Beach contained no fewer than thirty mixed media sculptures by Holstad, together forming an exhibition entitled *Love Means Never Having To Say You're Sorry*. The structure of this one-person show was similar to that of nesting dolls, the sculptures contained by the exhibition, which was in turn contained by the fictional site of Leather Beach, housed in the space of an old deli. Holstad's installation remains for me an important counter to understandings of political liberation that continue to define gay politics in the earliest decades of the 21<sup>st</sup> century. His critique is leveled in the visual language of the past and complicated through the poaching and collaging of several distinct historical, sometimes incommensurate, communities. While Holstad's collaging of historical referents avoids didactically intimating a linear history, he nevertheless is subtle in his reliance on chronology to counter traditional mappings of history. First, though, it's worth describing the scope of *Love Means...* and the initial critical reception to this particular installation.

Viewers enter *Love Means Never Having To Say You're Sorry* through a revolving door impregnated with the singed hair and features of bearded men. Immediately to the left are two hemp gloves that jut from the wall at right angles, each holding the base of a metallic pom-pom, the bulk of which has found its way to the ground directly below [fig. 2.1]. Vegetable leather and hemp garments stained green and brown (wheatgrass and dirt) are set out in service cases as they would be in a couturier's showroom or balanced on rigid toothpaste-blue chain mobiles. Elsewhere, a group of

cloth carrots bearing explosive wicks for stems sit lonely in a half-lit display case. The florescent lights above defy their own industrial rigidity and instead sag and droop, flicking on and off. In the middle of the room sits a small waist-high station, a cross between an ironing board and a shelving unit. It holds a metal food grinder which has already excreted dry, cylindrical turd-like droppings (really ground-up wheat grass snipped from a patch growing on the bottom shelf below it) alongside bottles of herbal supplements: St John's Wort, ginseng, goji berries, Siberian Eleuthero, and valerian [fig. 2.2]. Downstairs past the underground receiving (a necessity on the busy streets of Manhattan), is a bathroom and a short hallway lined with sagging soft velvet ropes and stanchions. Beyond that, tucked into the deepest part of the deli is the meat locker. This space is home to the eponymous leather beach which is covered in black ashtray sand, stubbed out cigarettes and empty American Spirit packs. Discarded clothes and a backpack leaking a petrified morass of Styrofoam balls lie limply next to a pair of soft amplifiers. The whole scene is lit by a large gay sun – a wood-veneered tanning booth inscribed with the image of a kneeling lamb [figs. 2.3, 2.4]. Everywhere are tiny grasshoppers (or are they locusts?) made of cut up pencil parts, perched atop the display cases, on the many droopy gasmasks made from underwear and green-bean cans, and on woven dynamite fuse vests [fig. 2.5]. On the first floor a soundtrack of insects orchestrated by Graeme Revell adds a subtle cue that regardless of the conditions outside, the time inside is night; meanwhile a throbblingly loud song created by the Austrian Industrial noise outfit Painslut, pulses in the tiny underground meat locker.<sup>135</sup>

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<sup>135</sup> Painslut's 2002 CD, *The Exploration of Pain and Grief*, features two photographs of Fakir Musafar, a performer whose experiments with piercing, body modification and the practice of suspension have made him an icon in leather communities. In the smaller photograph, Musafar is posed portrait-studio style while he is bound at the chest and with an elongated metal neckbrace. The other, larger photograph is a solarized image of Musafar suspended by two large metal hooks through his chest, his head lolled back in ecstasy.



Figure 2.1: Christian Holstad, *Pray for the Dead and Fight Like Hell for the Living Part I (white hemp gloves and pom poms)* [detail], 2005-6. Vegetable leather, hemp, pom poms, dirt, masonboard, metal.

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For more on Musafar, whose work hooks into a larger academic discussion of “Modern Primitivism” that I am putting aside, I would direct any interested person to Mary Kosut’s “Exterme Bodies/Extreme Culture” which seeks to describe not only a history of extreme body modification, but adeptly limns the academic understandings of such performances. She also provides an participant/observer account of a Musafar performance. Mary Kosut, “Exterme Bodies/Extreme Culture,” in *The Body Reader*, eds. Lisa Moore and Mary Kosut (New York: New York University Press, 2010), 184-200. Although not covered in this dissertation extensively, there is also long and fabulous history of leatherfolks using experimental noise/electronic/punk music as soundtracks for fucking. Gayle Rubin’s article on the soundtrack at The Catacombs begins to cover this. Rubin (1997): 5, 7. Fred Halsted, the subject of my fifth chapter was also interested in aligning new wave and electronic sounds with representations of leathersex, this is especially true of his film *A Night at Halsted’s* (1982), which included the (unauthorized) use of songs by bands such as Nuns, Patti Smith, Devo, The Bags, Lene Lovich, X, Blondie and X-Ray Spex. William Friedkin used songs by The Germs in his 1989 film depicting New York’s leatherscene, *Cruising*. As one might guess, there is a lot of further work to be done in teasing out the intersection of certain kinds of music (punk, new wave, disco, electronic) and leathersex.



Figure 2.2: Christian Holstad, *Sissy Bar*, 2005-06. Vegetable leather, chain, wheat grass juicer, glass, wheat grass, St. Johns Wort, American Ginseng, goji berries, Siberian eleuthero, Valerian.



Figures 2.3, 2.4: Christian Holstad, *Light Chamber (Tanning Booth)*, 2006. Tanning booth, wood, nylon mesh, speakers, vegetable leather, paint, pencils, beans, human hair, horse hair tubing, upholstery fabric, handmade underwear, xerox transfers, black sand, hemp, leather, glitter.





Figure 2.5: Christian Holstad, *Confessional (Revolving Door)* [detail], 2006. Wood, screws, ball bearings, nylon mesh, pencils, human hair, paint.

The visual referents are many – David Velasco in his review of Leather Beach for artforum.com picks out Claes Oldenberg, Hans Haacke and film noir as particularly compelling – but Holstad’s titles offer other clues.<sup>136</sup> Sculptural objects like the door, titled *Confessional (Revolving door)* may suggest Foucault’s notion of the process of confession as central to the project of building modern sexualities, or the gloves holding bedraggled poms entitled *Pray For The Dead and Fight Like Hell for the Living Part I (white hemp gloves and pom-poms)*, directly appropriate the words of early 20<sup>th</sup> century leftist labor-politiker Mother Jones. Some items in display cases, *Its Hard on the Knees (Blue Levis)* and *The American Spirit*, make their own allusions: blow jobs and the co-optation of Native American images for cigarette branding. Yet, if I am to be thorough, there are still more references to be teased out, as is made clear by the three-page press release and multipage mini-booklet produced by the artist’s dealer Daniel Reich. The latter features color Xeroxes of artist-made collages, and was used to sell key components of *Love Means...* to prospective collectors. These two sources throw out a *truly* astonishing array: Charles Dickens’ *A Christmas Story*, Surrealism, the Hitler Youth, Ghandi, Dick Hebdige’s ideas regarding subculture, torture chambers, Germany’s reform, Martin Luther, Christian catacombs, Studio-54, Norse mythology, nocturnal landscape painting traditions, Brawny paper towel advertising, Marlon Brando’s character in *The Wild One*, Sandro Botticelli’s *The Birth of Venus*, Jesus Christ, Renaissance and Northern Renaissance Christian painting and sculptural traditions. Throw enough things against the wall and something’s bound to stick, right?

Holstad’s program is, in fact, much more tightly controlled than this. Only one text was offered as a guide to the visual unfolding of the artist’s installation – a Xeroxed

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<sup>136</sup> David Velasco, “Christian Holstad,” [review] *Artforum.com*. March 17, 2006. Accessed June 6, 2012.



copy of the first chapter of Larry Townsend's seminal book *The Leatherman's Handbook*, originally written in 1972. Thus, it is not the variety of source material that make Holstad's installation notable, but rather it is in thinking *through* Townsend's text that the various elements of *Love Means...* begin to congeal into something equal to but summarily larger than just an "[exploration of] the lamentable state of New York's grime and grit" or an "encomium to leather culture."<sup>137</sup> While this combination is adroit - grief for the present and praise for the past - a question still remains: towards what ends?

The answer to that question may lie in the Xeroxed and bound copies of Townsend's first chapter entitled "Why Leathersex?", available for viewers to pick up and read as they move through *Love Means...* Townsend begins his book by providing historical precedence for leathersex in a way that willfully ignores the specificity and political implications of the instances of slavery he quotes. In fact, parts of Townsend's text border scarily on a nostalgic revisionary history – one that seeks to place old power imbalances in a kind of stasis.<sup>138</sup> This is done, presumably, to find a historical plumline that will legitimize and perhaps naturalize leathersex:

While our present day practitioners groove most strongly on black leather, motorcycles, and the attendant products of modern technology, there were many ancients who practiced an earlier form of the art with whatever materials were available during their particular life spaces. Binding a captive on the battlefield and claiming him as one's property-sexual or otherwise- was common enough in most early civilizations.<sup>139</sup>

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<sup>137</sup> Ibid.

<sup>138</sup> "Those days are past... gone forever, and properly so, though the fantasy may provoke a nostalgic sigh." Larry Townsend, *The Leatherman's Handbook* (Los Angeles, CA: LT Publications, 1994), 7. Reprint of 1972 original.

<sup>139</sup> Townsend, 6.

The fantasy of an historical past – that binding a captive was filled with erotic charge or, as Townsend later interprets, that the genocidal programs of the Nazis were merely a “sublimation of the aggressor’s libidinous drives” is used by Townsend as a psychoanalytic means of describing the roots of macro and micro historical traumas.<sup>140</sup> This tactic may not be surprising considering that Townsend’s background was in clinical psychology. In this regard, Townsend’s text serves to point to the perceived net effects of large-scale repression of sex drives. And yet in his first chapter Townsend is also highly wary of the practice of psychological analysis, calling his colleagues wholesale “mind-snoops” and mocking their diagnostic capabilities when it came to assessing clients who participate in leathersex. While Townsend never gets academic – these are clearly not the intentions of the book – it is still easy to pick up on his introductory method, that is he uses muddy historical evidence to provide proof that leathersex indeed *has* a history; this is an important contention, made at a moment when no one had yet attempted to describe a history of leathersex. His historical précis also contains useful anecdotal bits, such as the explanation for the etymology behind Sadism and Masochism (The Marquis de Sade and Leopold von Sacher-Masoch), guiding his readers towards the literature of the two authors and thus towards becoming historians themselves.<sup>141</sup> All of this precedes the second half of “Why Leathersex?” which is a narrative account, told in the first person, of a master-slave relationship experienced by Townsend’s buddy Dave. In short, Dave picks up from a local bus station a trick, a military officer, who wants to be dominated in leathersex. Told with the effulgent and prickly language of an erotic fiction story, this latter section is a rhetorical example of putting leather into practice; read and learn. Each chapter of the *Leatherman’s Handbook* is composed of a section of explanatory advice

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<sup>140</sup> Townsend, 8.

<sup>141</sup> Townsend’s last chapter is an extension of this early rhetorical move, a literature review of most of the fiction, non-fiction and psychoanalytic work on leather.

followed by an erotic story, often stemming from an alleged real-life experience. Thus the book vacillates between two-handed and one-handed reading. It is information and whack-off material.

Similarly, Holstad's installation is not only meant to be a comment upon the vast amounts of referents that he picks up and regurgitates, but rather seeks to suggest action – preferably sex – as a method of self-care and wellness. The metal and vegetable leather waist-high shelving unit entitled *Sissy Bar*, for example, provides the supplements necessary for a healthy and hearty fuck: St John's Wort to defend against depression and anxiety, Goji Berries to improve vision and to act as an antioxidant, Siberian Eulethero to heighten memory and the capacity to learn, Ginseng to serve as a stimulant, Valerian to aid in sleep (for after?), and Wheatgrass to cleanse the liver and colon – an herbal enema. The platform is optimal height for fucking, the sissy bar itself being a motorcycle accessory designed to hold a second passenger in a reclining position. Thus *Sissy Bar* is a device for the betterment of the body through ingestion, oral and then anal.<sup>142</sup>

Townsend's text echoes narratives of betterment and sexual liberation, making many important moves that are later picked up and elaborated upon by academics like Gayle Rubin; de-genitalizing erotic activity, remaining vigilantly sex-positive, and pointing out, perhaps unsurprisingly, that S/M *relies* on the existence of a moralizing sex-negative society:

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<sup>142</sup> This idea of betterment is not isolated to *Love Means...* in Holstad's output. Most notably the artist has collaborated with Chris Verene on Verene's *Self-Esteem Salon* which has been ongoing since 1998. The purpose is to build "[...]a temporary sanctuary to be used in helping strangers—"clients"—to make a sincere and lasting change in their lives. The project is something like a day spa — a short time spent in therapy that will have positive results on your personal life." "Cheri Nevers and the Self-Esteem Salon," *Chrisverene.com*. n.d. Web. Accessed June 6, 2012.

When a man finds himself in a situation where his heaviest inhibitions can be cast aside, he revels in the fantastic sense of total liberation. Like a classic, unmutilated cock, the participant's (figurative) glans is all the more sensitive for having been shrouded in its foreskin of social propriety.<sup>143</sup>

While Townsend's preference for uncut dick is notable, he is more importantly suggesting that social norms make leathersex all the more enjoyable. There is not leathersex qua leathersex, but rather a reaction-formation to overly stringent moral codings around sex. Leathersex is, importantly, *a response*.

Holstad suggests something akin to Townsend's revelation, or maybe he seeks to update the leather response to his current moment of 2006. Holstad's is a world in which where commerce has become a key part of living and fucking in leather. The visual coding of the space, a former deli, is already bound up in commerce, as is the sparse placement of clothes on low platforms, an imitation of couturier showrooms which often exhibit examples of their stock in place of entire inventories. And, *Love Means...* is a store! The merchandise may cost in the thousands of dollars but Holstad's artworks are still for sale. The banal activity of buying, or purchasing sexual gear is absent in Townsend's text, suggesting that leather practitioners did not at the point of *The Leatherman's Handbook's* writing have large-scale distributors beyond a few small mail-order leather catalogues and the occasional leather shop in large cities.<sup>144</sup>

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<sup>143</sup> Townsend, 12.

<sup>144</sup> Jack Fritscher maintains that *Drummer* magazine was a gussied-up version of these mail-order catalogues, and that the publisher John Embry never "much cared about the editorial content of *Drummer*." Jack Fritscher, "I-B. Author's Eyewitness Historical-Context Introduction, Part 2, written October 24, 2001: Who Died and Left Vanilla Academics in Charge of S&M Culture?" in *Gay San Francisco: Eyewitness Drummer, Vol. 1*, ed. Mark Henry (San Francisco, CA: Palm Drive Publishing, 2008), 376.

Instead, the language of *The Leatherman's Handbook* is bound up in a language of liberation, emerging from the successes of the first Gay Freedom Day Parades, and the formation of activist organizations like the Gay Liberation Front. The language that Townsend uses is one of “total liberation,” and yet remains anti-political in the coalitional sense; there is no call to gather up all S/M practicing men to form a group to work towards liberation.<sup>145</sup> For Townsend, liberation is only achievable at the personal level, “by your very acceptance of the leather scene, you have proclaimed your complete sexual liberation.”<sup>146</sup> There is something here about totalizing, complete, all-encompassing immersive liberation – the idea is to make bodies internally flush with feelings of liberation.

If this sounds familiar, it should. This idea of liberation is closer to the kind promised by a segment of late 60s U.S. counter-culture highly attuned to the effects of hallucinogens. The total liberation of leather sex is similarly transcendental – and Townsend was not the only leather writer to suggest this.<sup>147</sup> Perhaps just as apropos a referent would be the liberation promised through crystal healing and chakra alignment in emergent New Age and self-help movements.<sup>148</sup> There are moments where Townsend even dabbles in self-help platitudes: “Try to be introspective. Ask yourself what you

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<sup>145</sup> Townsend, 12.

<sup>146</sup> Townsend, 14.

<sup>147</sup> This is indeed the main premise of Geoff Main's *Urban Aborigines*, which seeks to describe (in a language cribbed from Anthropology) the rituals of the leather “tribe.” Geoff Mains, *Urban Aborigines: A Celebration of Leather-Sexuality* (San Francisco: Gay Sunshine Press, 1984).

<sup>148</sup> Actually, the Western New Age movement had earlier origin points, as mapped out by Paul Heelas in *The New Age Movement: A Celebration of The Self and the Sacralization of Modernity*. While Heelas ultimately provides a much-needed critical perspective on New Age, he also contends that New Age is an outgrowth of particular trends in Modernist culture and thought. While I don't delve into New Age's histories or origins, Heelas is an excellent introduction to such a history. Paul Heelas, *The New Age Movement: A Celebration of The Self and the Sacralization of Modernity* (Cambridge, MA: Blackwell Publishers, 1996).

really want, and when you seem to have an answer – try it! If it doesn't work for you it isn't the end of the world.”<sup>149</sup> Holstad's installation picks up on these large-scale conversations and genres, especially the notion of healing, but again the *response* is keyed to the contemporary.

HIV/AIDS, like consumerism, hums in the background of *Love Means...*; the space is infested with “bugs” and small lesional holes appear on many of the soft sculptures. By turns cynical and earnest, Holstad reformats the rhetoric of liberation movements of the past through the trauma of a world still reeling from a pandemic. The rah-rah pom-poms of liberation in *Pray for the Dead and Fight Like Hell for the Living* are worn out and disintegrated by vigorous shaking. Someone has been cheering too hard, or has been fighting too long to be seen, rendering the signal itself ineffective. This is precisely where healing is important. Holstad's installation implies that in the exhaustion of political liberation and of fighting a pandemic space needs to be made for a new kind of fusion neo-hippie-pervert politics, where kinky sex and goji berries may have similarly healing properties. By proposing a good round of fucking, the artist is not just returning to some nostalgic pre-AIDS past (remember the bugs? They're everywhere, un-ignorable!) but rather proposing to fight fire with fire - traumatic psychic loss due to the living out of community sex fantasies with a homeopathic dose of those same sex fantasies tricked out with new vegetable-leather gear.

There is also a critique of the representation of a brand of mainstream gayness contained within Holstad's installation – Townsend called these men “fluffs” in *The Leatherman's Handbook*. Many of the garments on display, particularly the numerous

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<sup>149</sup> Townsend, 14.

gas masks are made from refashioned underwear, which both the elastic waistbands and Holstad's label texts are wont to mention is manufactured by 2(x)ist, a brand that rose to prominence in the 1990s and 2000s primarily through its strategy of target-marketing to gay men. I think it is worth discussing, maybe only in a tertiary way, the visual-rhetorical advertising practices of 2(x)ist, as Holstad's inclusion of this brand is uniform and pointed. Typical of the company's long-standing campaign is an ad reproduced during the year Holstad was fashioning many of the objects in *Love Means...* [fig. 2.6]. This ad appeared in the June 2005 issue of *Out* magazine, a nationally-distributed print publication focused largely on middle-class white gay men's issues. In it, a singular male model dons a pair of white briefs. Perhaps the model is Latino (his tattoo reads "José") or white – in the dim light it's difficult to tell, which is just as much a visual strategy as overtly highlighting a model's particular ethnicity.<sup>150</sup> He is unadorned, smoothly shorn, glistening and dripping with sweat. The model is lit by red and orange lights which cast a large black shadow behind him, and thereby defining a shallow space. The red lights are a visual cue for the model's "hotness," in that he is both physiologically heated and sexually desirable. Only the product, the 2(x)ist underwear, isn't drenched in sweat. Of course, if they were wet, the white fabric would become more transparent giving the viewer a glimpse of the model's package. The mere suggestion of such visual stimulus is enough to be titillating, without being censored out of a publication such as *Out*. Beyond the bad punning of the text ("a brief affair" – get it?), the advertisement is remarkably unremarkable in that it conforms to not only 2(x)ist's back catalogue of imagery but almost every other contemporary underwear company targeting to gay men in magazines

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<sup>150</sup> Indeed, 2(x)ist was riding a trend that was pointed out by *The New York Times* reporter Ruth La Ferla in 2003. Her article "Generation E.A.: Ethnically Ambiguous" briefly attempts to describe the trend of casting "ethnically ambiguous" models in high-profile advertising campaigns and also relates the embodied and ambivalent feelings many of the "E.A." models had towards their newfound popularity. Ruth La Ferla, "Generation E.A.: Ethnically Ambiguous," *The New York Times*, Dec. 28, 2003.

such as *Out* as well. The fantasy for sale is a neatly trimmed, smooth, ethnically ambiguous, titillating but safe guy – more an Adonis than a pisspig. He is the 1990s incarnation of the 1970s fluff, or twink.

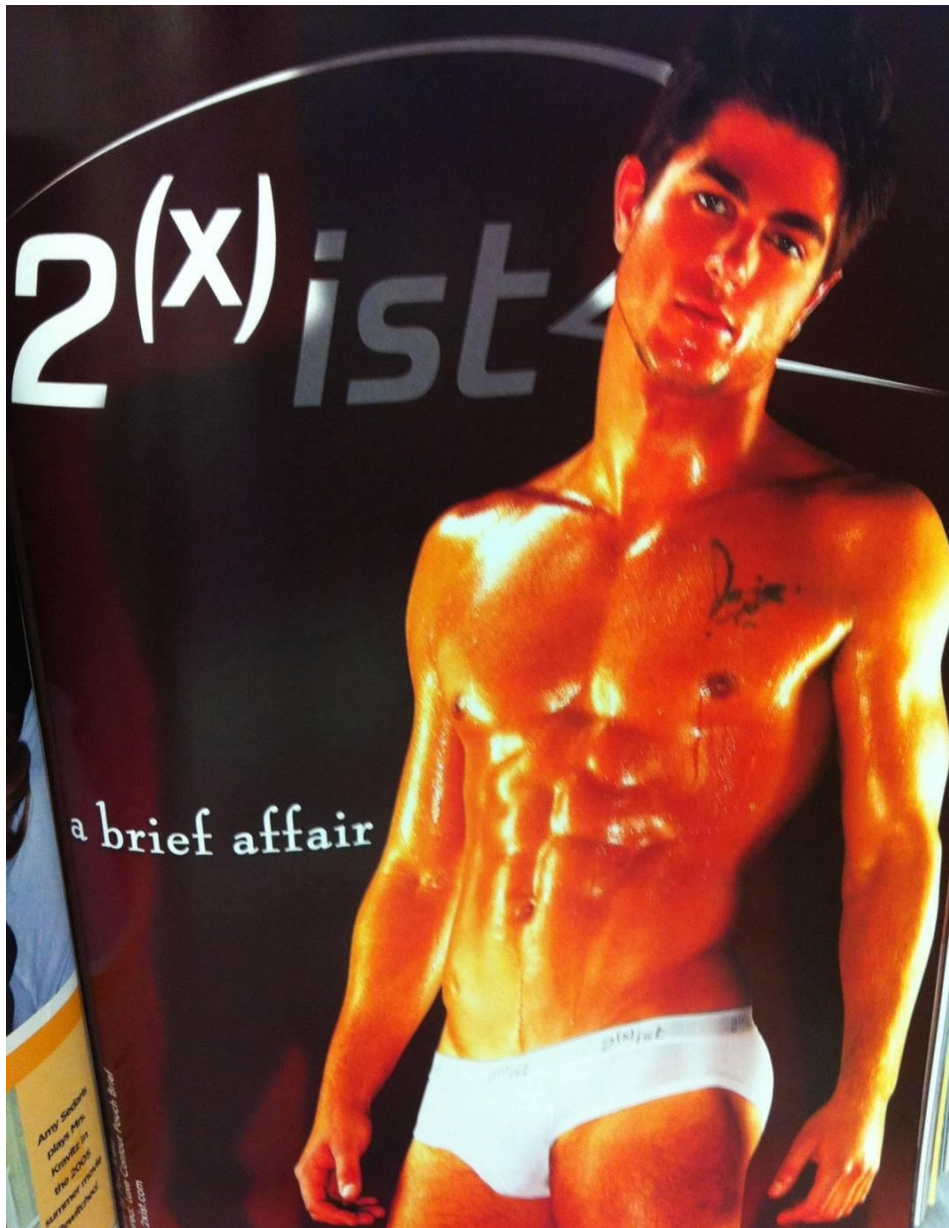


Figure 2.6: 2(x)ist advertisement, *Out*, June 2005.



But this particularly-sited imagining of masculinity only makes sense within the context of the total lifestyle being sold in *Out* and its competition (*The Advocate*, *Instinct*, *Gay Times*, etc.) which includes beach vacations and cruises, a slew of articles concerned with (non-existent) marriage and military rights, advice on grooming and clothing, and reports from circuit parties. This is what liberation looks like in the beginning of the 21<sup>st</sup> century? Townsend's total liberation is totally... for sale. Even the name of the brand seems to reformat liberation politics; "We're Here! We're Queer!" becomes just a sad little pun, "2(x)ist." Underneath the underwear, then, is a conservative politics – one that refuses to suggest sexual activities of radical consequence and instead pushes consumable products alongside a specific program for liberation, marriage and military rights, which seek to make specifically self-identified gay men normalized citizens.

Throughout *Love Means...* are several pairs of gasmasks made from repurposed 2(x)ist underwear [fig. 2.7]. Unlike a typical gasmask made of black rubber, Holstad's versions are soft white cotton-blends. Glass eyeholes are replaced with small hematite or rose quartz stones laid in a herringbone pattern. In crystal healing lore hematite cleanses negative energy while rose quartz opens up the heart. Where normally a breathing apparatus is placed, Holstad's gasmasks are plugged up with empty vegetable cans which have stained the mouth-hole with nutritious juice. It is clearly, however, fetish gear and not war-wear, when seen within the context of the vegetable leather chaps and the gimp masks that surround it. And so the artist radically remakes these twinkie undies and complicates rough-n-raunchy kink wear with crystal healing and nutrition. Holstad's is a *response* to multiple cultures (twink, leather, new age) without being aligned comfortably within any. He puts divergent, yet particularized, histories in tension without resolution.

Holstad proposes a new and imaginary subculture in order to remark, sometimes caustically, on existing subcultures. And this is not the only history Holstad proposes.



Figure 2.7: Christian Holstad, *Mobile #2* [detail], 2005-06. 2(x)ist underwear, hemp, hematite, can, wood, cotton, wheat grass stains, vegetable leather, pencils, human hair, zipper, xerox transfers, antique trimming, explosive wicks, strike anywhere matches, wooden hangers, chain and hardware.

Holstad presents a subtle and careful treatment of his source material. Tellingly, Holstad, in his Xeroxed copy of Townsend's chapter, reorders his guiding text. The

Xerox is not actually from the first edition of the Leatherman's Handbook (which have become increasingly rare), but a 1994 reprint, produced after the onset of the HIV/AIDS pandemic. In the 1994 source-text Townsend's first chapter is prefaced by two warnings typed out on a single page, one regarding the graphic nature of the content and the other regarding the historicity of the material contained within: "We also note that the book was written before the onset of our current health crisis. Please remember the safesex rules that the author and others have been preaching for the last ten years!"

Placed before the first chapter, these warnings serve as an acknowledgement that safer sex is not the *lingua franca* of the text to follow. It's an apology, an "I'm sorry." We know, though, from Holstad's installation title, a camp riff off of the novel and 1970 film *Love Story*, that saying "sorry" is not part of the artist's schema. As if to respond to Townsend's apology, Holstad re-shuffles the order of pages of his source-text, placing the warning/apology *after* Townsend's first chapter instead of prefacing it. Holstad's copy of Townsend's text therefore mirrors a traditional historical chronology (pre-HIV/AIDS and then post-onset). Not taken for granted, chronology is *arrived at* and not the set default unfolding of an historical narrative. The chrono-logical ordering of Holstad's Xeroxes addresses the very illogic of HIV/AIDS trauma.

Holstad's use of Townsend's text is an argument for the usefulness of a certain orderings of history. Apologies come afterwards – AIDS can be the suffix, and not the prefix to queer sex. History, here, is a way of remaking old sexual politics anew, imagining a space of overlap where little seemed to exist before, and so providing a *response* to pervasive yet dubious ideas about what it means to be a queer in the 21<sup>st</sup>

century. It's a salve, of sorts, that oddly *opens out* the viscera; perhaps restorative as a trip to the beach or as exhausting as a good fucking.

Luckily, at Leather Beach, they're one and the same.

### Chapter 3: Yellow

No one really knows the origin of the hanky code, even though many make guesses or produce anecdotal evidence. The hanky code, broadly speaking, is a system of signaling or flagging a variety of sexual interests on the body with colored handkerchiefs or bandanas. Particular colors are aligned with particular sexual activities, and based on which rear pocket the hanky was placed, indicate a generally active or passive role. Contrary to the notion of a dominant right hand/side, the wearer places a hanky on the left side of his/her body to communicate dominance. A submissive relationship to a particular color-coded act is communicated through right side placement. The wearer of a hanky only has to know the colors of the hanky code that interest her/him; it is truly a system developed for motivated *visual apprehension*.

But it's also the subject of much debate, during the 1970s and even now. A letter to the editor in a 1976 issue of *Drummer* points out that the genesis of the "media hoax" known as the hanky code was "an article on S&M in New York's *Village Voice* [in] the summer of '75 [...] they're still laughing about it back in the pressroom."<sup>151</sup> Elsewhere the origin is attributed to a leather store in San Francisco called Leather and Things in early 1969, or to a distressed reporter for *Queen's Quarterly* who needed copy to make deadline and so invented the hanky code.<sup>152</sup> And although *Drummer* published a hanky code in 1977, there were also hanky codes published in 1974 and 1975 in *Scene and Machine*.

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<sup>151</sup> A Trooper, "Malecall/ Dear Sir:," *Drummer* 1, no. 10 (Dec. 1976): 4.

<sup>152</sup> Bob Guenther, "Four Early Hanky Codes," *Leather Times*, no. 23 (Fall 2004): 3-5. I have not yet found evidence that a hanky code appeared in one of the first issues of *Queen's Quarterly*, counter to Guenther's assertion.

At issue in all of these accounts are the interactions between broader gay and lesbian communities, specifically print media, and the sites of commerce. These origin tales align with the arguments made about contemporary BDSM communities by Margot Weiss in her book *Techniques of Pleasure: BDSM and the Circuits of Sexuality*. Weiss examines the ways which alternative sexual practices are dependent upon Capitalist and liberal economies and political systems. According to Weiss, buying is part of the practice of leather. A similar point is made by Gayle Rubin in her dissertation:

Nonetheless, class is a factor within the leather community. Despite working class origins of leather iconography, leather apparel is expensive. While some men apply quite modest means to the accumulation of this special fetish, often men with money are better dressed and better equipped.<sup>153</sup>

But a bandana is not a garment made of leather. In terms of cost, a hanky is cheap, providing an opportunity for those of limited economic means to enter into and participate in the signaling system of leathersex. Regardless of the original intent of the code (as hoax, as copy, as humor) it was in fact used, to varying degrees, throughout the 70s and 80s. The versions of the hanky code are as numerous as the litanies of fetishes indexed in the longest hanky codes. Hanky codes, and their specific language, were often cannibalized and expanded based on a particular distributor's aims, with the result being a great accretion of codes, making the hanky code mostly a joke. Gayle Rubin summarizes these concerns succinctly:

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<sup>153</sup> Rubin (1994), 224. Rubin then goes on to describe the implications of being a leather person of limited or low income means: "It is the poor and working-class men who staff many of the non-union (and low-benefit) leather businesses and who have few other employment options. It is the low-income leathersmen who live in the most hostile or homophobic neighborhoods, where as visible homosexuals they face a disproportionate amount of violent gay-bashing. And it is these men who have the considerable courage it takes to ride public transportation in full leather regalia." Rubin (1994), 225-226.

At first, the major colors were red, black, yellow, and navy blue. [...] By the late 1970s the hankie codes had been elaborated and subdivided into every more byzantine categorizations of sexual tastes. But while there were individuals whose tastes undoubtedly ran the gamut, the more exotic colors were often worn more for humor than serious cruising.<sup>154</sup>

Sometimes these codes were tweaked to reflect the gendered position of the publisher, as is the case with the lesbian hanky code published by Samois, which adds the color Maroon for menstruation fetish, and alters the meaning of pink, which in other codes indicates alternatively tit torture, dildo play and piercing, to signify the activity of fondling breasts.

Interesting to me, though, in doing research on the hanky code is that yellow is one of the few, if not the only color, that does not change its meaning across various hanky codes. Yellow always indicates golden showers/piss play – the act of releasing, drinking and otherwise making use of urine in an erotic context. This combination of color and activity doesn't seem arbitrary. So strong are the associations of the color yellow with urine that a great deal of the material from leather communities that is yellow directly references pissing. But even though the associations between yellow and piss are strong, a practical use of the hanky code becomes challenging because of the interior conditions of most leather bars – many with dim to no light, which would make “reading” the color of a particular hanky difficult, especially when trying to parse out subtle color gradations such as yellow, mustard, and rust. As a letter appearing in *Drummer* from a reader known only as A Trooper wanly puts this quandry: “Is the man into piss? If there isn't a wet patch on his Levis, stand downwind from him and breathe deep, Dad. Or wet

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<sup>154</sup> Rubin (1994), 295-297.

your leg. But don't look for a yellow hanky."<sup>155</sup> Or as Jack Fritscher, gonzo editor of *Drummer*, writes in the magazine soon thereafter:<sup>156</sup>

Try walking up to a dude who drips with leather, chains, and six handkerchieves [sic], and you find the only way to get an honest reading these costumeey nights is to ask him: "Do you mean all those signals, or are they only junk jewelry?" Some of these frauds cruise under so many flags they look like the semaphore version of *Hello Dolly*.<sup>157</sup>

Fritscher's complaint is different from A Trooper's; for Fritscher it is the excess of signals/flags that reveals a poseur. A Trooper's issue with the hanky code is that the code is a form of negotiation that replaces direct contact with the body – either visual or olfactory. Colored bandanas, then, are just decoration.

Writers for more mainstream gay publications represented the hanky code as an analogous way of thinking about leather communities and leathersex – the operative mode: secrecy. Seymour Kleinberg, writing for *Christopher Street* focuses his efforts on exposing new modes of masculine behavior in gay male communities:

Today to replace the usually reliable information that straight or campy behavior conveyed in the past, gay men at the leather bars have taken to elaborate clothing signals: key chains or handkerchiefs drooping from left or right pocket in blue or yellow or red, all have secret meanings.<sup>158</sup>

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<sup>155</sup> A Trooper, 4.

<sup>156</sup> I use the term "gonzo" knowingly. In a paper that Fritscher published in conjunction with the 2005 Queer Keywords Conference in Dublin, Ireland, Fritscher transparently describes his prose style as "literary," "spinning off of Hunter Thompson... as well as Joycean wordplay and stream of consciousness." Jack Fritscher, "Homomascularity: Framing Keywords of Queer Popular Culture." *Gay San Francisco: Eyewitness Drummer, Vol. 1*, ed. Mark Hemry (San Francisco, CA: Palm Drive Publishing, 2008), 263.

<sup>157</sup> Fritscher (1978c), 72.

<sup>158</sup> Seymour Kleinberg, "Where have all the sissies gone?" *Christopher Street* 2, no. 9 (1978): 4-12.



Within this context, the hanky code itself is indicative of the secrecy of leather communities. This form of knowledge is positioned by Kleinberg as a replacement of otherwise “reliable information that straight or campy behavior conveyed in the past.” Legibility within gay communities is threatened through an adherence to the hanky code. Leather communities and broader gay communities agreed that the hanky code presented particular problems in reading potential partners, but they agree for different reasons. For some in leather communities the hanky code was a camp decoration, for some in gay communities the hanky code was quite oppositional to camp.

Examining the hanky code, and the numerous responses to the code, reveals more than may first be apparent: as a structure of recognition and difference, of seriousness and play, a mask and a mode of understanding the machinations of negotiating sex. Whether or not this system worked in the real world – the accounts above indicate the code was only marginally successful in that regard – the degree to which it was published, republished, amended and modified, marks the hanky code as an important cultural indicator of the ways leathersex was represented and understood through visual cues.

I begin with the hanky code because it inspired the organizing principle of this chapter, which is, simply, the color yellow. Soon the structure of this chapter is going to change radically. What follows is a collection, presented as a list, akin to the structure of the hanky code. Like the hanky code, this chapter has the appearance of arbitrary organization, and yet the kinds of resonances that are revealed when examining the contexts in which the color yellow appears within the visual documents/objects of 1970s leather communities builds an iconology where community, history and sex are deeply imbricated.

The organizing principle of this chapter may at first seem simple – an exploration of a singular formal element, the color yellow. But yellow itself is a plurality of multiple hues whose differences in value are elided for the easier designation of yellow. What color counts as yellow? Does marigold? Does a dingy brown? Does the deep amber, even brown, of a popper vial? And does the color yellow actually have to exist on the document itself, or is the word enough? Is the intimation (read: “dim,” “dingy”) of the color enough? Does urine automatically count as yellow – because it can be clear also? Here, yellow functions as a heuristic substitute for expanded concepts of sex, history and community that I examined in my first chapter. Thus, to write such an experiential history of yellow, as I attempt to do here, is to engage with the process of being-with history.

The following collection of documents/objects gives the reader a sense of the variety and vitality of historic leather communities while also indexing the present task of the historian - gathering and organizing primary research material. This chapter provides multiple vantage points, often simultaneously. The lack of transitional sentences and synthesizing paragraphs is meant to present a challenge to a reader’s ability to easily make meaning. Still, it is my hope that this does not turn a reader away, but rather asks a reader to engage meaningfully with the staccato procession of visual material - either coming to terms with their (dis)composed order, or refusing this placement and instead imagining a different kind of (in)coherence. While my authorial voice is still present (in enframing and ordering), I hope that a reader can re-imagine what the chapter would look like, feel like, if the following parts were re-ordered. I’ve certainly done this throughout the process of writing this chapter.

When I began writing this chapter I placed similar kinds of documents/objects together in discrete groups: a list of hanky codes, half a dozen descriptions of bar interiors, representations of piss-play, advertisements for poppers. Each section, in effect, told its own story about a certain categorical construction. I have already done this, writ small, in the first few pages of this chapter. In its next incarnation, I split these sections apart, insisting on a total interpolation, almost to the point where the order became all-too-predictable: a hanky code, then a description of a bar interior, followed by a representation of piss-play, and finally an advertisement for poppers. Now, in its present form, the list exists in a state between the first two organizing strategies. Sometimes like-objects are placed adjacent in the list, intimating a particularly close relationship, and sometimes they are split across pages, emphasizing their differences and also their ubiquity and dissemination within leather communities.

For example, placing a short paragraph describing an advertisement for a Mandanna tank top next to a description of the actual tank top would draw a direct connection between the social act of advertising and the object itself – thus intimating the lived structure in which a leatherperson might first read about a Mandanna through *Drummer*, then order such an item and finally receive it through the mail. Once received, a buyer would enter into a process of internal negotiation, adjusting the expectations produced by the initial advertisement with the physical object. How does the shirt conform to or deny what was promised in the advertisement? Yet, in this chapter I separate these two descriptions because I want to instead insist on their apart-ness, highlighting the distinctions between them. Such an ordering is, in fact, much closer to the way I encountered these two particular objects finding the tank top first on an early visit to the Leather Archives & Museum, and then later encountering the advertisement

for The Mandanna in an issue of *Drummer* I purchased. I use this example because the relationship is a particularly personal one, tied inherently with an order of encountering.

By ordering documents/objects in this manner, it is my hope to give a sense of relationality without relying on a particular person, place, or object as a binding agent. I opt instead for another throughline, the abstract idea of the color yellow, which I believe helps me to better reflect the time-consuming process of researching, organizing, and presenting as well as the current state of leather archives and history. I want to make an argument that at once adheres to and works against ways of culturally making meaning, through oppositional processes of elision/generalization and particularization/differentiation. In doing so I'm attempting to build a rhetorical structure as elastic as Nancy's conception of "being-with." For Nancy, being-with is the "question of social Being", supposed as "*the* Ontological question."<sup>159</sup> Similarly, I think the appearance and ordering of objects (their closeness, distance, absence) asks the historian to confront a similar ontological question: a question of historical being. And so part of this work is embracing the ability to work backwards – to untie rather than to tie narratives together, allowing objects to hang more loosely with one another – leaving room for a reader to interject, imagine and play. This chapter is ultimately about the erotic act of pissing, sure, but it's also about poppers, beer, and light in leather bars. It is "social Being" on a multitude of levels – drug experience, architectural context, bodily functions, even the hue which is ascribed to a past fondly remembered ("golden years," "golden memories"). I use a color to draw these things together, and in doing so a sense of social relationship is revealed, but never as the sum total of the items on my list.

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<sup>159</sup> Nancy (2000), 57.

Dozens of decisions about what to include, what to leave out, and most importantly, how to order these objects, have shaped the meanings of this chapter. I still question my inclusions and which objects/documents I’ve edited out. More than any other chapter, this one remains, to my great excitement and anxiety, always in a state of incompleteness. I think this is a benefit of insisting on more experimental structures in presenting and enframing alternative histories. Hopefully this results in a rich (and sometimes flummoxing) reading experience for you...

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A card produced in 1980 by Samois titled “The Handkerchief Color Code for Lesbians”, lists yellow as signifying “Gives Golden Showers” if worn on the left side and “Wants Golden Showers” if worn on the right side [fig. 3.1].

Yellow is one of eighteen options.



Figure 3.1: Samois, Handkerchief Color Code for Lesbians, 1980.

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“Many people call those 1970s issues (19-30), ‘The Golden Age of *Drummer*.’ Maybe. Maybe not. As a scholar of gay pop-culture, I’d like to think they were, but as *Drummer*’s chief writer at that time when I was also the editor, I have the interest that a parent has in a child who has grown up. Something Al [Shapiro AKA the artist A. Jay] and I did in those 70s issues put *Drummer* on the map. After that Golden Age of the 70s, what staff changes followed in *Drummer*’s stormy, tempest-tossed office could best be charted by the National Weather Service. Eventually, half of San Francisco was ‘editor’ of *Drummer*, and every reader was either a *Drummer* daddy or a *Drummer* boy, or, god help us, Mr. *Drummer*. Nevertheless, *Drummer* was a force of nature.”<sup>160</sup>

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The Leather Archives & Museum has in their fibers collection a screenprinted Mandanna tank-top [fig. 3.2]. Inside of a frame of paisley, most commonly associated with industrially produced bandanas, are two concentric circles of cartoonish representations of men fucking. The men fuck in ways that correspond to the colored ground each is on. The inner concentric circle features in each quadrant three or four figures in heraldic arrangement. In the yellow quadrant a mustachioed and capped man turns his head to drink from a bottle he holds. The other hand grips his cock which is spraying (indicated by three squiggly lines) down on the heads of two men lying at his feet. Each of these men also hold their diminutive drawn cocks; one urinates on the standing man, the other on himself.

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<sup>160</sup> Jack Fritscher, “Al Shapiro, A. Jay and Hairy Chess: Confessions of a Comic Stripper,” *Drummer*, no. 107 (August 1987): 34-40. Because I often don’t set up the context of block quotes in this chapter, as I normally would in a prose paragraph preceding a quote, I’ve indented the text *and* included quotations. I sacrifice what may be grammatically gauche for the purposes of clarity of attribution and readability.



Figure 3.2: Soft Corps, Mandana [tank], c. 1978.

The outer concentric circle is an expansion on the theme and is only loosely symmetrical in comparison to the almost strict heraldic arrangement of the figures in the inner circle. Figures at the borders of the quadrant often cross the strict ground boundary lines and so practices bleed into quadrants that otherwise would not indicate the activity represented. For example, the figures that cross the yellow and red quadrants don't seem to be engaged in golden showers, but rather are fisting, the activity associated with the red hanky, and fucking, associated with the color blue. The effect is a continuum of fucking with various practices given their own space for expression, at once a cordoned and coherent community that sometimes spills outside of demarcated boundaries.

Yet there is more yellow on this tank top, in the form of pale yellow stains below the screenprinted design. There is no information as to what the stain is. One can only guess or, if we believe the visual language of the shirt, assume.

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“Bandanas are another matter, one which is also confusing. Depending on where you live or what you're into, red bandanas mean butt fucking, fist fucking, or the Hollywood Vice Department on the prowl. In the first two cases, worn in the right rear pocket indicates passivity; in the left, activity. With the Vice, either side implies activity; watch it!

“A blue bandana also has more than one meaning. The red bandana wearer may sometimes switch pockets and preferences; the blue bandana wearer never does. With him, right is right and left is left and the twain shall meet only with his opposite number. The blue bandana also often, but not always, identifies one who



is into scat trips. The yellow bandana, thank goodness, has only one purpose: it's to blow one's nose in."<sup>161</sup>

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*Drummer's* sixth issue features the color yellow throughout. On the cover is a grid of words in orange, pink, red, yellow, gold and white [fig. 3.3]. In yellow text: "In the Fiction Section," "The Comics," "Center Foldout," and the text of a button exclaiming "The L.A.P.D. FREED the Slaves April 10, 1976" (discussed in the seventh chapter). In gold: the list of countries and prices, "the leather fraternity" and "the leather bar scene."



Figure 3.3: *Drummer* [cover], 1976.

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<sup>161</sup> Jeanne Barney, "The ABC's of S&M," *Drummer* 1, no. 1 (1975): 31.

Inside the issue there are two sections printed on matte yellow paper. The first section is composed of the first chapter of an erotic novel by Robert Payne entitled “Epilogue.” The story, based on “real events and real people” features a fictionalized version of Payne reading his own prose and wrestling with a recently dissolved relationship. This character’s friend and editor Jeannie (a homophonic match with Jeanne Barney’s name, then-editor of *Drummer*) suggests filling the copy space for a section of the magazine entitled “In Passing” with an obituary of the relationship. “In Passing” was the name of the section found in the inside back cover of *Drummer* during Barney’s tenure as editor. The chapter ends with seeing a sunrise.

The last page of this yellow-papered section contains ads for a party game, *California Scene* magazine, Locker Poppers, piercing jewelry from Male Hide Leathers, and the American Civil Liberties Union.

The second section of yellow paper features only ads, for a catalogue service, Cat’s Meow poppers, a pewter cock ring, piercing rings (in 14k white or yellow gold), The Beverly Cinema Club, *Drummer* subscriptions, Bob Damron’s Address Book (a precursor to a national gay yellow pages), and *HIM* magazine subscriptions. This second section also features a set of horoscopes, twenty-four in total, two for each sign “S” and “M”. Sagittarius M reads: “Attend a rap session at the Gay Community Center and manipulate it into a semantic seminar on the connotational differences between ‘Golden Showers’ and ‘Water Sports.’”<sup>162</sup>

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<sup>162</sup> Golden showers refers exclusively to piss play, while water sports refers to a variety of “wet” activities including but not limited to enemas, spitting, and piss play.

Elsewhere the issue also features an installment of the ongoing comic *King* drawn by British artist Bill Ward. The first proper panel of the comic is colored gold-orange with an inch-diameter circle of yellow encapsulating a figure of a biker. This biker appears in close-up in subsequent orange panels, cruising a leatherman leaning against a brick wall. The yellow helps a reader to focus and to pick out the most important aspect of an otherwise bustling city: the biker.

On the back cover of the issue a mostly red photo advertisement for a Los Angeles Insurance Agency specializing in “life, joint life, key man & Partnerships” includes two pieces of yellow text. One is the photo credit “Photo taken at The Oaks, Carmel Valley.” The other: “You call yourself a lover... but how much do you really care???”

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*The Gay Picture Book*, published by Beaverbooks in 1978, is covered with pictures of blue-jeaned asses flagging red, blue and yellow hankies [fig. 3.4].<sup>163</sup> These pictures are organized in alternating rows of two series of six images each. By tracking the photograph of the near-white jean pants with the yellow hanky fluffed out of the left pocket, the organizing scheme becomes clear. Unlike the two distinct images of the red hanky, one coming out of a right pocket and the other coming out of a left pocket, there is no complimentary placed hanky for yellow or blue.

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<sup>163</sup> Michael Emory, *The Gay Picture Book* (Beaverbooks, 1978).



Figure 3.4: *The Gay Picture Book* [cover], 1978.

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“Tantalizing, inviting, he pauses under the stained aura of its bleak light before he enters the toilet, a truncated tunnel redolent of urine. Sexual exhortations usually for humiliation tinged with violence pock the peeling walls. Outlines of swallowing mouths and engorged cocks are carved like scars there. The light is filthy yellow. Four men stand before the aged urinal, like a trough, sediment smooth as velvet on the stained porcelain. A man sits on the toilet. A round hole in its gashed partition gapes into the next cubicle, where a man in leather stands. The odor of poppers further taints the air.

No one moves, it is as if all have been trapped in a dream of squalor. Now Chas located himself in the middle of the men at the yellow trough. He opens his pants, exhibiting his cock. Then he begins to piss, an unsteady stream at first – that disturbs him – then a gathering flow, finally a full gush – that pleases him. He

looks down at his liquid discharge splashing on the spoiled porcelain. In a glance, he's determined there's nobody here he's attracted to.

Leaning back, pulling at eyes, he does not squeeze out the last drops. He shoves his cock into his pants. His fingers touch the moist spot there. Warm. His memory darkens as if the dim yellow lights had inhaled.”<sup>164</sup>

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A *Drummer* article concerning a party at the Trading Post, a leather goods store and bar located at 960 Folsom Street in San Francisco, includes a photograph which shows a hanky code display in situ [fig. 3.5].<sup>165</sup> The photograph, one of ten in the two page-spread, depicts a glass counter display adjacent to a bay of open bookcases holding books and magazines. Two men on either side of a bookcase handle some kind of reading material. The man in the cowboy hat to the left seems to be engrossed in reading while the man to the right, his back to us, looks up. Simple track-lights illuminate the reading area and spotlight the hanky code display atop the glass case. The display rests alongside dildos lain on their sides and a rubber fist/forearm pointing towards the ceiling. Running down the middle of the display is a series of overlapping hankies folded into squares. We might assume, although the photograph is black and white, that the fourth hanky from the top is yellow, as it is practically washed out by the spotlight. On either side of these hankies is enough space on the white display board to write what each is for – although the writing can't be easily discerned.

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<sup>164</sup> John Rechy, *Rushes* (New York: Grove Press, 1979), 81.

<sup>165</sup> “Drummer Goes to the Trading Post Party,” *Drummer* 1, no. 10 (1976): 62-63. A.Jay, the artist who created graphics for San Francisco clubs and *Drummer* had this to say about the Trading Post: “This leather department-store is comprised of six or eight special boutiques that very *everything* from books, magazines... leather/western gear, toys, to heavy racks, torture tables, hoists ‘n cages.” A. Jay, “Folsom Street... San Francisco’s Leather Lane,” *Queen’s Quarterly* 8, no. 5 (Sept./Oct. 1976): 25.





Figure 3.5: “Drummer Goes to the Trading Post Party” [detail], 1976.

The hanky code’s visual organization privileges coupling, and this is reflected through the other photographs reproduced for the article [fig. 3.6]. Couples figure prominently in seven of the ten photographs, with lesser but equal amounts of attention paid to the body *in toto*, the face, and the ass.

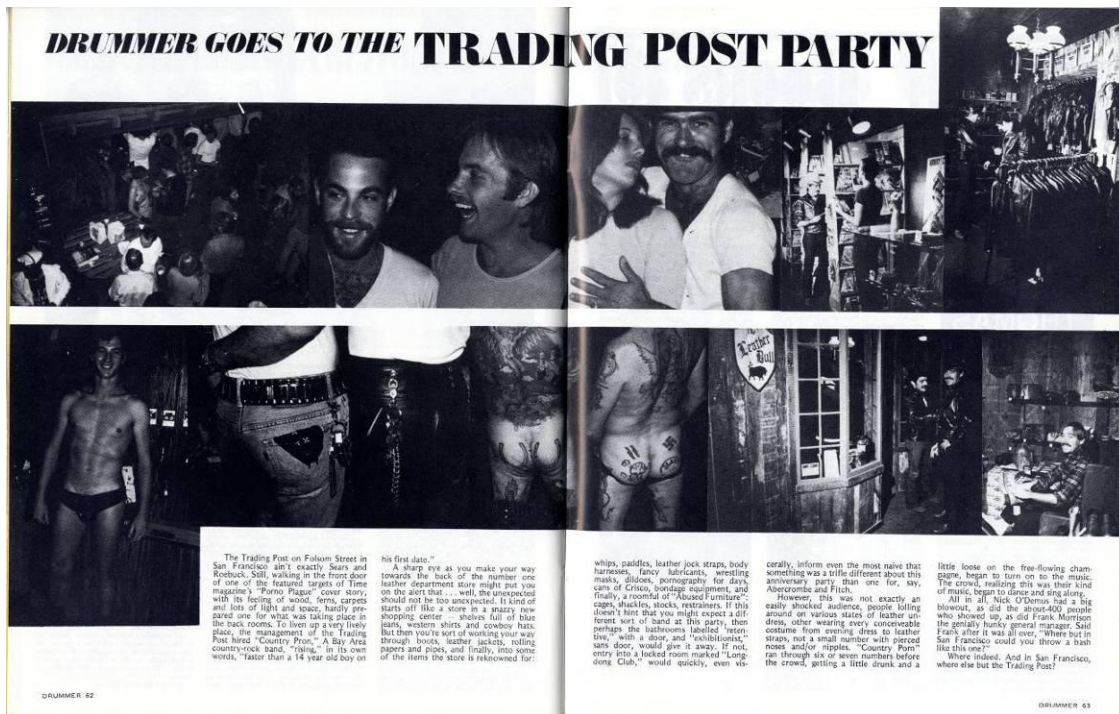


Figure 3.6: “Drummer Goes to the Trading Post Party”, 1976.

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A photo from *The Gay Picture Book*, taken by Michael Emory, depicts a storefront hanky code display [fig. 3.7]. The two-page spread contains four photographs in total, all by Emory, and each features a storefront of a clothing/accessories store coded as gay. These are not photographs of the interiors of the stores but rather their more public fronts, as the plate glass reflections at the front of the picture plane indicate. The stores are difficult to identify as no contextual information beyond the photographer’s name is given in the credits. One storefront contains Anita Bryant protest shirts and bumper stickers (“Anita Sucks Fruits” and “Anita Bryant Sucks Oranges”) and a small display of poppers propped up with a card reading “Some facts about BULLET.” Another storefront displays a grid of underwear and sunglasses. The storefront with the hanky code display also includes two trucker caps (Dodge and Ford), a belt, and the large



phallic shadow that breeches the neat order of the hanky code display chart labeled “S&M Hanky Color Code.” From this form hang two strings (perhaps one, doubled over) that appear in both shadow and in space of the display, implying that the large shadowy protrusion hangs just above the field of view of Emory’s camera. Hankies are neatly folded into triangles and presented in multicolored queues. Yellow is listed as signifying “Golden Shower, Passer” if worn on the left and “GS Receiver” if worn on the right. Mustard is listed as “Wants Big One” if worn on the left and “Has 8” or More” if worn on the right. Yellow and Mustard are two of thirteen options.

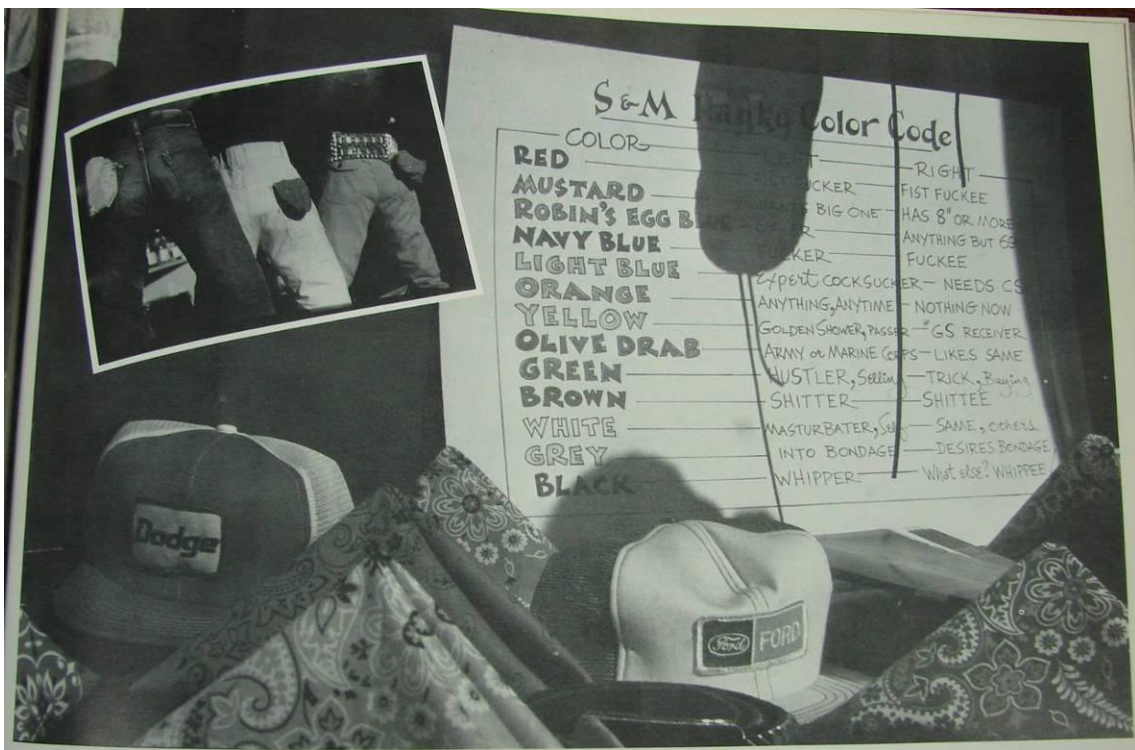


Figure 3.7: Michael Emory, Hanky Code storefront display, c. 1976.

Another Emory photograph overlaps this one, and it features a line of jean pants, placed on half-body mannequins, diagonally receding into a shallow space. Each jean has



a hanky tucked into the left or right back pocket. The display acts as a method of showing off merchandise, but also teaching potential hanky code users how to wear their hankies. For those potential customers who already flag, the display is an affirmation of already-embedded modes of dress. Together in the context of *The Gay Picture Book* the photographs compliment one another, just as sure as the following two pages feature photographs of an empty leather sling and a bare ass. The reader of *The Gay Picture Book* has to make active meaning of the photographs.<sup>166</sup>

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Roger Fraum, in his newsletter R.F.M., describes a film by Fred Halsted:

NEW S/M FILM BY FEED [sic] HALSTEAD [sic] – PIERCING FILM: My dear Friends;

There are several reasons for this SPECIAL NEWSLETTER...but first let me give you a preview of the new films. The first one is a S/M piercing film. There were originally 4 reels but regretfully 3 of them did not come out. Something was wrong with the lighting. However – the one that did come out is pretty good. It Stars Fred Halstead [sic] and is kind of unique because Fred is sucking cock in the movie and if you know anything about Fred – this is not par for the course for Fred. The movie does have a piercing scene but the piercing was done incorrectly – but the film is still very good. My personal opinion is – FRED WAS LOADED WHEN HE DID THE FILM. The film is around 200 feet – 8MM color. I do want to point out though that the film has a slight yellow tint to it but this is rather minor—it is quite good and should not be missed. I do not know how long I will

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<sup>166</sup> There is another photograph in *The Gay Picture Book* that images hankies, in use. Again, beyond the photographer (Alan Kleinberg), no contextual information is given by the book. In this instance the hanky, tied around the wrist of a man in a disco, is used to absorb vapo-coolant liquid, ethyl chloride. When inhaled ethyl chloride behaves similarly to poppers, amyl/butyl nitrite (discussed elsewhere in this chapter), although its effects are neurasthenic and not vascular. Vapo-coolant, unlike poppers, can be relatively safely applied to the skin (it's a topical refrigerant), and has a sweet odor – in comparison to the musty chemical smell of poppers. In this photograph, hankies serve as an absorbent wick for vapo-coolant and placed on a part of the body that can be conveniently brought up to the face and huffed.

be able to get them so order it now---don't wait—B of A or Master Charge or R.F.M. charge—I take checks also by the way----<sup>167</sup>

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An undated yellow hanky carries a reproduction of an ink drawing by Etienne [fig. 3.8]. Above the drawing is the name of the bar which distributed this hanky, The Gold Coast.<sup>168</sup> Etienne's signature graces the bottom right of the image, and centered beneath the image, in mechanical type, the word Chicago. The image itself is a study in graphic contrast (no grey tones are to be found) and features the face and upper chest of a man. The right side of the image is obscured by shadow, giving little information beyond the man's silhouette as to who the figure might be. The left side of the figure is illuminated by an unseen light source, and garments and facial features can be easily discerned from one another. The man wears a biker's cap, whose slick visor covers the man's eyes in shadow. The man's hair, a short mop peeking out from underneath the cap and a mustache, is highlighted to intimate that the man is blond, a fact reinforced by the color of the hanky itself. The man's shoulders are covered by a leather jacket, splayed open to reveal bare skin and an ankh necklace. An aureole encircles the head and shoulders of the man, perhaps making the image iconic. The vivid yellow of the hanky refers handily to several features of the illustrated image (the hair, the ankh) as well as the name of the bar from which it came.

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<sup>167</sup> Roger Fraum, "NEW S/M FILM BY FEED HALSTEAD – PIERCING FILM," *RFM*, no. 3 (October 1977).

<sup>168</sup> This particular image also appears in an advertisement on page 59 of *Drummer's* 24<sup>th</sup> issue (1978), in a section of classifieds printed on gold-colored paper.



Figure 3.8: Etienne, Gold Coast hanky, c. 1978.

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The Mandanna offered a way of displaying colored hankies not just from a back jean pocket, but also on the front of a T-shirt or tank top.<sup>169</sup> Produced by Soft Corps, advertisements for Mandannas show up in *Drummer* in late 1978 and 1979. One of these advertisements [fig. 3.9] features three men (two are bearded) in different embracing positions.<sup>170</sup> The man on the left slings his arm around the man in front of him. This middle man reaches back into the back pocket of the man on the left, leaving a patch of yellow design visible through the two men's crossing bare arms. The man on the right, who is almost completely turned away from the camera (save for his head which looks

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<sup>169</sup> The Mandanna was also available as a hanky.

<sup>170</sup> The advertisement I use is from *Drummer* 1, no. 4 (1978): 4.

back knowingly), seems to be doing something with his left hand. What that is we can only surmise – grabbing his package? Putting it in the front pocket of the man in the middle? Two of the men – the ones on the left and right – have a multitude of different colored hankies coming out of their back pockets. It is an excess of signals.



**LET HIM PULL  
THIS ONE OUT  
OF YOUR PANTS**

TRADE IN YOUR BANDANNA FOR A MANDANNA  
IF THE COLOR DOESN'T TELL HIM, THE DESIGN WILL

from **Soft Corps**

SOFT CORPS PRESENTS THIS  
UNIQUE, COLORFUL DESIGN  
THAT MIXES FUNCTIONAL  
INTENSITY WITH GOOD OLD  
FUN. LET HIM READ THE  
GAMES YOU'D LIKE TO PLAY.  
LET THIS WINNING DESIGN  
BECOME A STAPLE IN YOUR  
WARDROBE.

SOFT CORPS • 853 Folsom St. • San Francisco, CA 94110

Enclosed find \$\_\_\_\_\_ in U.S. Cash, Check or Money Order for  
the following item(s).

Quantity	Type	Price	Total
	4-Color Mandanna	\$ 5.00	
	All Red	\$ 5.00	
	All Blue	\$ 5.00	
	All Yellow	\$ 5.00	
	All Black	\$ 5.00	
	4-Color French Cut T - Shirt S ___ M ___ L ___	\$10.00	
	4-Color Tank Top S ___ M ___ L ___	\$9.00	
	4-Color Regular T - Shirt S ___ M ___ L ___ XL ___	\$ 8.00	
		Total Enclosed	

Name \_\_\_\_\_  
Address \_\_\_\_\_  
City \_\_\_\_\_ State \_\_\_\_\_ Zip \_\_\_\_\_  
Signature \_\_\_\_\_ I am over 21.  
All prices include shipping. Calif. residents add 6% sales tax.

Figure 3.9: Soft Corps, Mandana advertisement appearing in *Drummer*, 1978.

On their shirts is a diamond design split into four colors. The design of this t-shirt hanky doesn't look like the paisley all-over pattern of an ordinary hanky; it instead seems to be oriented in two concentric circles of pattern inside of the diamond. The design's detail is not visible from the advertisement. We only get textual hints as to what the design means; the advertising copy reads "If the color doesn't tell him, the design will!" and elsewhere "Let him read the games you'd like to play."

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Jack Fritscher on The Mineshaft:

Any given night, a man can climb into the tub for nonstop Golden Showers. Fairer faucets, major and minor (less than seven inches), than he ever dreamed of, turn on - literally - to him and all over him. Saturday nights, especially, on three sides of the tub, men press in, six or seven deep. Men nearest the tub unbutton their Levi's, unsnap their leather codpieces, or go for their meat by peeling down their jocks. They are the front line of the Third Kind, pressed from behind by dozens of others chugging their beers as they press forward towards the tub.<sup>171</sup>

[...]Off in another Mineshaft corner, in more private spaces, other men have waded off to bridge waters of their own. Near the bar, a short muscular man pisses into his empty beer can. He hands it to his buddy. They nod. They smile. The buddy drinks.<sup>172</sup>

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A hanky code published in the June-July 1974 issue of *Scene & Machine*, a D.C.-based magazine that describes the code as a West Coast phenomenon, lists Yellow as signifying "Emblem for Golden Shower passer" if worn on the left and "A GS receiver" if worn on the right. Mustard is listed as signifying "His criterion is size, the bigger the better" if worn on the left and "Has eight inches or more and wants it known" if worn on the right.

Yellow and mustard are two of fourteen options.

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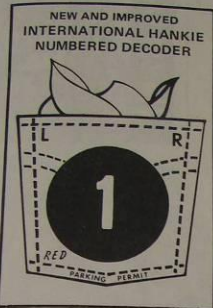
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<sup>171</sup> Jack Fritscher, "Pissing in the Wind," *Drummer* 3, no. 20 (January 1978). Reprinted in *Gay San Francisco: Eyewitness Drummer, Vol. 1*, ed. Mark Henry (San Francisco, CA: Palm Drive Publishing, 2008), 601.

<sup>172</sup> *Ibid.*, 603.

Perhaps because the hanky code was getting too complicated, A Taste of Leather, the name given to the store located inside of the Trading Post proposed a system that combined hanky code colors with numbers. Sold in-store and through the store's print catalogue, *Communicate*, buyers could choose to purchase colored hankies or white hankies with a number printed on them [fig. 3.10]. Customers could also buy T-shirts "decal on the LEFT or RIGHT SIDE," hand towels, bumper stickers, and hard hats emblazoned with the number decal of their choice. The ad includes this tip for Highway cruising: "When your desired number decal shows up on the highway, pull up in front of car to be cruised, turn your hazard lights on. If other car is interested he should turn on his hazard lights and then proceed to rendezvous." Number of course refers to the linguistic sign (1,2,3, or 4), but is also slang for a sexual encounter. The number for Yellow ("Golden shower passer/ receiver") is four, whereas the number for Mustard ("His criterion is size – the bigger the better / has eight inches or more and wants it known") is eight.

### NEW AND IMPROVED INTERNATIONAL HANKIE NUMBERED DECODER



### ORDER BLANK

ORDER NUMBER	QUANTITY	DESCRIPTION	CODE NUMBER	PRICE	TOTAL
J-8549		T-SHIRT S-M-L-XL Decal on LEFT or RIGHT SIDE		\$6.95	
1195-N		HANKIE (WHITE) WITH NUMBER		\$1.50	
1196-C		HANKIE (SPECIFY COLOR)		\$1.50	
1196		HAND TOWEL		\$3.95	
1197		BUMPER STICKER		.25	
4527		HARD HAT (LEFT or RIGHT) BLACK-WHITE-RED-ROYAL BLUE		\$3.95	
				MINIMUM ORDER \$10.00	
				SUB TOTAL	
				CALIF. SALES TAX 6%	
				POSTAGE, HANDLING & INSURANCE 10% OF SUB TOTAL	
				TOTAL	

MAIL TO \_\_\_\_\_  
APT \_\_\_\_\_  
ZIP \_\_\_\_\_

CHARGE TO: AMERICAN EXPRESS - BANKAMERICARD - CARTE BLANCHE  
DINERS CLUB - MASTER CHARGE - VISA

NUMBER \_\_\_\_\_ EXP DATE \_\_\_\_\_  
SIGNATURE \_\_\_\_\_ PHONE NO. \_\_\_\_\_

A TASTE OF LEATHER - TRADING POST  
960 FOLSOM (Between 5th-6th Sts.)  
San Francisco 94107 (415) 777-4643  
OPEN 7 DAYS NOON-6 - SUNDAYS 2-6

### COLOR DECODER

NEW & IMPROVED  
INTERNATIONAL NUMBERED HANKIE DECODER

**LEFT HIP POCKET**

None of the below numbers

Asshole bandit

A plunger, a real live plunger

Three ways

Golden shower passer

A whipper

'69' is what he has in tonight

Shitter

His criterion is size--the bigger the better

Has uncult cock

Army or marine corps.

Came straight from the office. No time to change

Bondage; discipline--light

Hustlers, selling

A drag in disguise

The insouciant habit of anything, anytime, anywhere

Unlimited but wants to discuss pre-Minoan art first

Likes to be jacked off

Likes to pierce

All of the above numbers

**NOS. COLORS**

8 DINGLE BERRY BROWN

1 RED

2 NAVY BLUE

3 RUST

4 YELLOW

5 BLACK

6 ROBBIN EGG BLUE

7 BROWN

8 MUSTARD

9 CHAR. TREUSE

10 OLIVE DRAB

11 WHITE

12 GREY

13 GREEN

14 LAVENDER

15 ORANGE

16 PUCE

17 BABY BLUE

18 TITTY PINK

86 RAINBOW

**RIGHT HIP POCKET**

Closet case. Came from Ogden, Utah

Asshole victim

Put your heels on his shoulder

Alone, looking for a couple

Golden shower receiver

What else? Whipple

Anything but '69' tonight

Shittie

Has eight inches or more and wants it known

Looking for uncults

Same, not so butch

Had time but is signalling non-conformity to the code

Same, but heavy

Hustlers, buying

His sister Kate

Nothing, never (his legs are glued together with Kewell)

Out looking for a discussion of pre-Minoan art

Likes circle jerks

Likes to be pierced

Tri-sexual -- will do anything

**HIGHWAY CRUISING:** When your desired number decal shows up on the highway, pull up in front of car to be cruised, turn your hazard lights on. If other car is interested he should turn on his hazard lights and then proceed to rendezvous.

Rev. Nov. '79

Figure 3.10: "New and Improved International Hanky Color Decoder" *Communicate*, 1980.

Elsewhere in *Communicate* shirts are sold that say "Piss on you", "Piss on me", and "Public Toilet" [fig. 3.11].

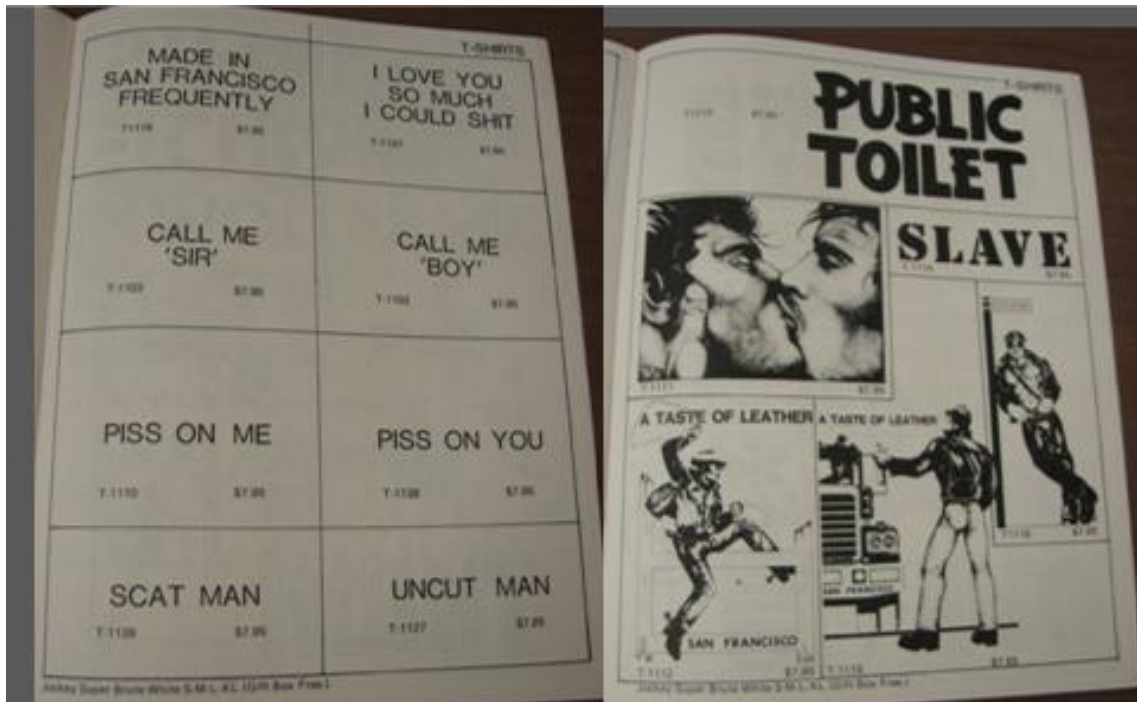


Figure 3.11: Pages from *Communicate*, 1980.

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“The Eagle’s Nest was a large, almost empty shell when Vic first arrived... A dozen early arrivals lounged in groups of twos or threes in various parts of the room, while a high volume blast from the jukebox made the place sound full and active. Dimly lighted, mostly from concealed, amber sources, the room looked more inviting and intimate than Vic had expected.”<sup>173</sup>

“A huge golden-copper moon had risen over the distant hills. Darkness had fallen completely, suddenly, seeming to envelop us in an atmosphere of viscous heat... and solitude.”<sup>174</sup>

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<sup>173</sup> Larry Townsend, *Kiss of Leather* (San Diego, CA: Phenix Publishers, 1969), 23.

<sup>174</sup> Townsend (1994), 196.



The first Hot Hanky Decals ad appears in *Drummer* number 22, 1977 [fig. 3.12]. Two policeman, one riding a motorcycle and one in a car converse. Between their turned heads is the line “Okay buddy, pull over!”, but it’s unclear which one is commanding the other to pull over, as both their mouths are open. Perhaps they are both pulling each other over – the excess of such an act (that two policemen should want to pull the other over) drives the humor of the ad, created by John Klamik, who went under the moniker Sean.



Figure 3.12: Sean, Hot Hankie Decal advertisement [two cops], *Drummer*, 1977.

The product being sold is a decal available in “14 HOT colors”, that is to be exhibited on the back outside of a vehicle – roughly the analogous place a hanky would appear on a human, the rear “bumper”. These decals were purportedly sold in “bars,

leather/novelty shops, baths, adult bookstores and cinemas, and selected clothing stores.” An abridged Hanky code is provided in the ad copy – yellow is defined simply by the acronym “GS” whereas Mustard is “Hung!”

In the next issue of *Drummer* the scenario drawn by Sean is different [fig. 3.13]. This time what the viewer sees is an aerial view of the bow of a ship. Furthest away from us is the back of a hairless sailor swabbing the deck and sweating from his neck and crotch. Standing on the viewing platform and facing towards us is a hairy and muscular captain. His higher vantage point (and more complicated headgear) confirms his position of power within a hierarchical relationship. He holds up and shakes a Hot Hanky Decal, his unbuttoned shirt and loosened tie revealing his chest and his pants are around his ankles. His crotch is strategically hidden behind the open corner of the viewing platform. He, too, is sweating from his head.



Figure 3.13: Sean, Hot Hankie Decal advertisement [shipmates], *Drummer*, 1977.

Above the two figures flies a seagull, cutely anthropomorphized as looking down and smiling at the young sailor. The sailor is being cruised from above, and rightly so as the gull's active placement of his decal (on the left side of his tailfeathers) compliments the placement of the sailor's decal (on the right side of his shorts). There is also a decal on the rightside of the mop bucket. Perhaps the gull's object of affection isn't so clear. The joke is reiterated in the title of the ad which speaks of "fly[ing]...signals."

While the same “14 HOT colors” are described in the ad copy, two rows of fifteen decals total are plastered to the left side of the viewing platform. Missing from the bottom right row is a decal, presumably the one in the captain’s hand. This is another excess of signal, one or two colors too many.

\*\*\*

In response to John Klamik’s death in 2005 a man named Jovan wrote this on an online forum set up by Kamik’s friends and family: “...those were golden memories in the early 1970's and I am part of those golden memories.”<sup>175</sup>

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“I paid my four dollars to a cordial cashier and found myself in a paneled, carpeted hallway lit in a deep dim gold.... I felt lost in the orangey, unreal lighting of the place and in my own dulled drunkenness.”<sup>176</sup>

\*\*\*

The leather artist Bill Tellman commissioned a tattoo from Sam Steward. Steward was a polymath, a university professor, a leather erotica writer who went under the nom-de-plume Phil Andros, a tattoo artist who mentored Cliff Raven and Don “Ed” Hardy, and an infamous research subject of Alfred Kinsey’s.<sup>177</sup> Tellman’s tattoo was the rune for

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<sup>175</sup> “From Friends,” *Seantheartist.com*. Jan. 6-11, 2005. Web. Accessed June 6, 2012.

<sup>176</sup> Bruce Benderson, *Meet Me at the Baths* (Gay Parisian Press, 1970), 13. In regards to a place called George’s Baths in North Beach, San Francisco – as far as I can discern, a fictional place.

<sup>177</sup> Justin Spring, *Secret Historian: The Life and Times of Samuel Steward, Professor, Tattoo Artist, and Sexual Renegade* (New York: Farrar, Strauss and Giroux, 2010).

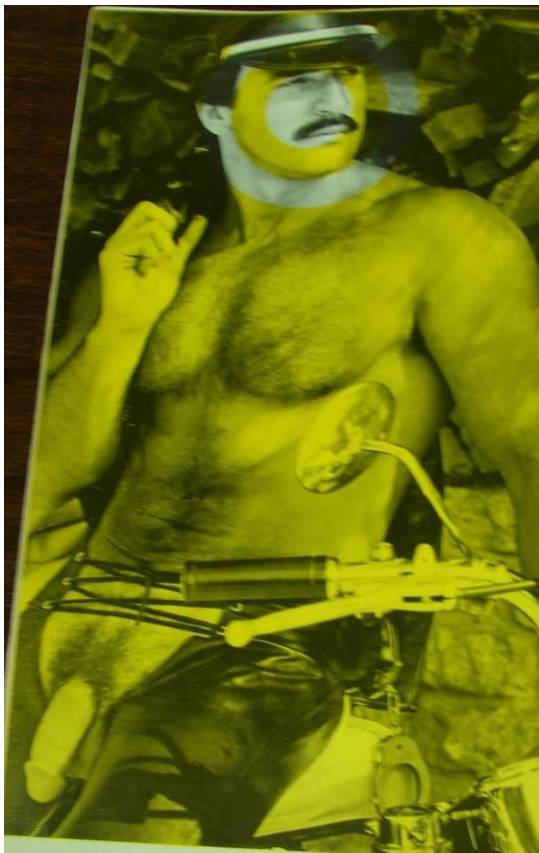
friendship, an upside-down peace sign with no outer circle, iterated twice, overlapped, and mirrored. Each symbol was tattooed a different color – red and yellow – the overlapping part was colored orange. During the process of tattooing, Steward quoted Aristotle to Tellman and his friend and then-lover Chuck Arnett, “A friend is a second self.”<sup>178</sup>

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“Whatthefuck is the Leather Fraternity?!” exclaims an advertisement in *Drummer*’s fifth issue [fig. 3.14]. The first part of the sentence is rendered in a yellow-golden hue, with “Leather Fraternity” in stop-sign red. The photograph beside the text, a shirtless man wearing crotchless chaps sitting astride a motorbike, is tinted yellow with the exception of two concentric circles. The model is Paul Barresi and the photographer John Embry. The circles are a device to draw a viewer’s attention to a particular place in the image, here, the face. It seems counterintuitive that the concentric circles do not highlight the flaccid penis dangling out of the crotchless chaps. The face, with its calculated sidelong glance, is available for the viewer to gaze and meditate upon. Thus, body, motorcycle and the wall and plants behind the figure all become part of the same yellow field. The face is the figure, everything else is ground. The ground contains all the hallmarks of the leather uniform, bike, jacket (slung over the shoulder), handcuffs (dangling from the chaps), leather chaps and cap. Flat and descriptive, this iconography would have already been decipherable to the reader of *Drummer* magazine.

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<sup>178</sup> Spring, 329-330. Although the quote “A friend is a second self” here is misattributed (by Steward? By Spring?) to Menander.



## WHAT THE FUCK IS THE LEATHER FRATERNITY?!

THE LEATHER FRATERNITY gets you acquainted with guys you have something in common with, guys who speak your language. It's a good feeling to have a new circle of friends, or one special friend, with whom you have so much going.

There are some hunky, groovy guys... perhaps in your own area... who are unsatisfied with the average relationship. They, like you, are looking for someone who is not run-of-the-mill.

**WHY NOT JOIN THE FRATERNITY?**

It's foolproof, confidential and legal. And it guarantees you a free ad listing in *DRUMMER*... correspondence privileges with other Fraternity members... a year's free subscription to *DRUMMER*... and a 10% discount on all Robert Payne/Emporium merchandise.

Sign up now! Don't miss a single exciting event or benefit!

**Leather Fraternity**

POST OFFICE BOX 3664  
LA CRESCENTA, CALIF. 91214

☐ I'm curious. Enclosed is a check for more info. I understand this will apply to my year's membership fee if I decide to join. Use it on me.

☐ I know where I'm headed. Enclosed is \$25 for my fee. Start my *DRUMMER* coming, send me my 1977-1978, and all the benefits of membership—and make it shine.

NAME \_\_\_\_\_  
ADDRESS \_\_\_\_\_  
CITY \_\_\_\_\_ STATE \_\_\_\_\_ ZIP \_\_\_\_\_  
I AM 21 YEARS OF AGE OR BETTER \_\_\_\_\_

THE LEATHER GAME IS BEST PLAYED WITH THOSE WHO KNOW HOW. Join that select group and/or let them join you. Life is more than a one-way street. Let us introduce you to someone who is going your way. Naturally, all applicants must be twenty-one or over.

Our LEATHER FRATERNITY membership is PAUL BARRETT of whom both sides and photos are available from ROBERT PAYNE at \$6.25 with \$10.00.

DRUMMER 24

Figure 3.14: Leather Fraternity advertisement, *Drummer*, 1976.

The final yellow element in this advertisement is located in the bottom right-hand corner, meant to be cut out (implied by the red dotted lines that sandwich this last piece of text) and sent back in exchange for membership to the Leather Fraternity. A yellow square, sent with some money across the country hundreds of times.

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A hanky code published in *Drummer* in 1977 lists yellow as signifying “Emblem for a Golden Shower passer” if worn on the left and “A Golden Shower receiver” if worn on the right. Mustard is listed as signifying “Has eight inches or more and wants it known” if worn on the left and “His criterion is size, the bigger the better” if worn on the right.

Yellow and mustard are two of twelve options.

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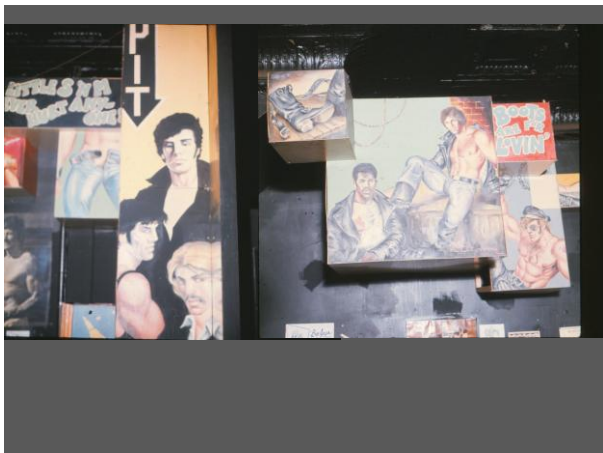
The Gold Coast is the name of a lakeside historic district in Chicago, but it is also the name of the city’s longest running leather bar. The Gold Coast bar opened in 1960 and closed in 1988, and was housed in a total of five locations over that period. The bar was chiefly run by Chuck Renslow and his partner Dom Orejudos, known widely as the artist Etienne or Stephen, who was the de facto artist of the bar. Etienne’s earliest murals for the Gold Coast are now lost as they were painted directly on the wall of the Gold Coast’s original location, and destroyed by Renslow and Orejudos when the bar changed locations.<sup>179</sup> It was at this point that Etienne created a set of painted murals on masonite, making them portable. Most of these murals were salvaged and displayed in the Chicago Eagle after the closure of the Gold Coast in 1988.

One piece of Orejudos’ mural project was a series of panels that created an interlocking rectangular and cube-like construction, whose purpose was to cover the pipes and infrastructure of the bar [figs. 3.15, 3.16]. These panels feature the color yellow

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<sup>179</sup> Bienvenu, 247.

prominently, along with blue and red. There are text panels exclaiming “Boots are for lovin’!” and “A little S&M never hurt anyone!” alongside a painting of a hand holding a whip set against a green background with the title of the bar emblazoned on the image. Other panels are closely cropped images of body parts: an ass, a torso, a face. One panel features a white male’s face resting on the bottom horizontal, flanked by a black boot on the left and the backside of a man wearing blue jeans. The man’s mouth is slightly open, and above it a golden stream that intimates but doesn’t accurately describe the form of a stream of urine hitting a solid object.



Figures 3.15, 3.16: Etienne’s modular murals from four vantage points inside the Gold Coast bar, c. 1975.



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The humorous excess of the hanky code is the subject of a photograph by Bob Opel that appears at the back of an issue of *Drummer* [fig 3.17]. Although the brightness and high-contrast of the reproduced photo render great detail difficult to see, the general subject is discernable. A man with a goatee stands against a bar holding a longneck glass bottle of beer with his right hand and his crotch with the other. Hanging out of his back left pocket is a hanky that approaches the size of a tablecloth. It touches the ground.

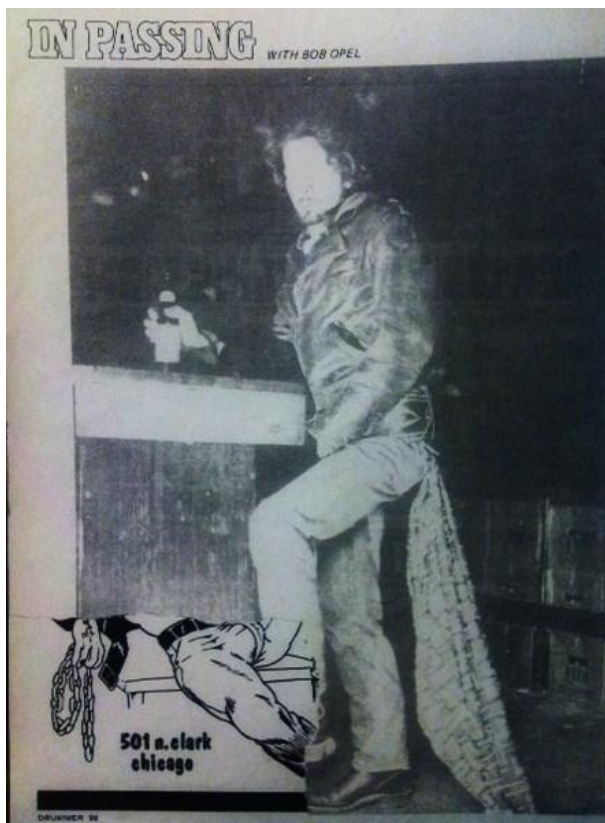


Figure 3.17: Robert (Bob) Opel, “In Passing”, *Drummer*, c. 1975.  
[N.B. the copy photographed is torn, as evidenced by bottom left corner.]

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“Be that as it may, there’s plenty of scene *and* sex for even the most jaded viewer or doer. Every act that can possibly be committed on, in, or to a human body is, including some that I would have bet against. Early on I was tempted to add to “Born to Raise Hell” the subtitle, “Forced to Drink Piss.” (Mercy! I’ve not seen so much urine outside of a hospital in years; it’s a wonder that poor child wasn’t permanently jaundiced!) Then I revised my thinking to “Live to Sniff Amyl,” for it sometimes seemed as though that were the only thing that kept some of the Ms alive and breathing. (I *do* wish I had a piece of the popper profit from this picture!)”<sup>180</sup>

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Many leather organizations, clubs and bars would create club colors – a specific logo that defined that event, organization or place. These colors would often exist in a variety of formats – from the metal pin, to the proper or a host institution – for example if a particular club patronized a particular bar their club colors would hang somewhere inside the bar. The GSA (Golden Showers Association), a group founded in 1980 in New York City, like many other organizations created their own colors. A photo of the leather banner that was hung for a time in the Mineshaft shows that the GSA’s colors consisted of a yellow circle containing a water-droplet shape, also yellow [fig 3.18].<sup>181</sup> Inside the droplet are the letters GSA in red. NYT, which stands for New York Tributary is sewn in red leather outside of the yellow circle. The color yellow as well as the organizational structure (tributary) is aligned with liquid properties.

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<sup>180</sup> Sidney Charles, “Born to Raise Hell,” [review] *Drummer* 1, no. 4 (Jan./Feb. 1976): 15.

<sup>181</sup> Wally Wallace (Mineshaft) papers. Leather Archives & Museum, Chicago, IL.



Figure 3.18: GSA (New York tributary) club colors, leather banner.

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An undated folded card given out by the Gold Coast lists yellow as signifying “Golden shower, piss” if worn on the left and “Golden shower, receiver” if worn on the right. A mustard colored hanky is listed as signifying “Has 8’ or more” if worn on the left and “Wants big one” if worn on the right.<sup>182</sup> A gold colored hanky is listed as signifying “Fantasy, guide” if worn on the left and “Fantasy, tourist” if worn on the right [fig. 3.19].

Yellow, mustard and gold are three of seventeen options.

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<sup>182</sup> I think 8” is meant instead of 8’.

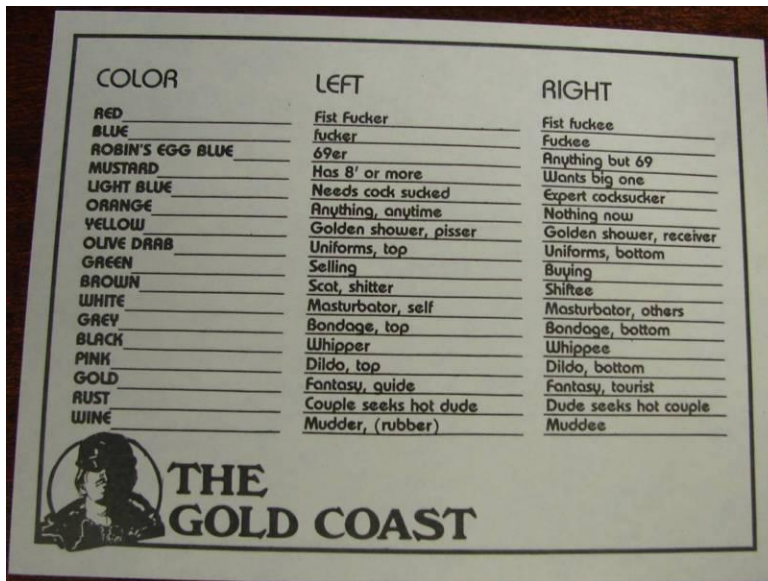


Figure 3.19: Gold Coast hanky code card, c. 1977.

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“The use of piss in the sex act has been mentioned previously, but I would like to make a few more specific comments. The “golden shower” is a joke among the fluffs, most of whom reject the scene as dirty or degrading. But for this precise reason, the use of piss to humiliate the M is one of the most popular forms of expression. For the S, it provides a means of showing his complete contempt in a way that is neither painful nor destructive. For the M, the feeling of fluid discharge, blasted warm and slightly acid from the cock of his master, can be so important to the fulfillment of his emotional desires that the scene is incomplete without it.”<sup>183</sup>

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On the back of *Drummer* magazine’s fifth issue is an advertisement for Larry’s, a bar located at 5414 Melrose in Los Angeles, CA [fig. 3.20]. The drawing, by Sean, is composed of a pair of wrist shackles in the foreground and five male torsos in the

<sup>183</sup> Larry Townsend, *The Leatherman’s Handbook* (New York: The Other Traveller, 1972), 223.

middleground. The drawing is framed by a bar of yellow above and a bar of black below, the two ink colors needed to print the advertisement. The previous issue of *Drummer* featured a lengthy review of the bar (quoted elsewhere in the chapter), and it seems that Larry's reciprocated by buying valuable color ad space. The front of the issue, printed in gold and black ink features a high-contrast photo of a leatherman sniffing a boot. Inside the magazine an advertisement for the Red Star Saloon also prominently features the color gold.

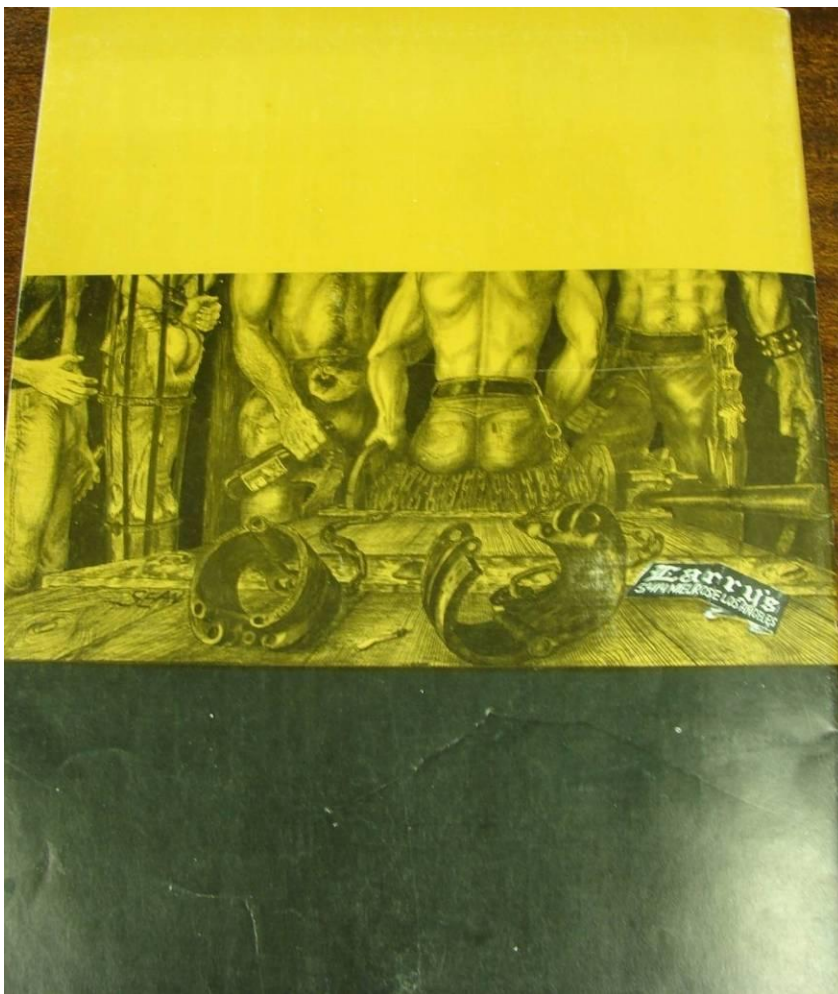


Figure 3.20: Sean, Larry's advertisement, *Drummer* [back cover], 1976.

No one is participating in golden showers in the image, although many leather implements and signals are present: a whip, multiple bottles of beer, keys, tit-clamps, chains, shackles, a body cage. Yellow, then, may be the color of the space the figures inhabit – dim and dingy. Only the name of Larry’s, made to look like the ubiquitous matchbook advertising the name of any generic bar, is printed in black and white.

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“It was slightly past midnight when Kelly Britton turned in at the door of the *Scorpio*, his favorite cruising spot. He sucked in a deep breath as he stood just inside the entrance, letting his eyes adjust to the deep gloom of the place after the street-brightness of neon and the headlights and high-watt streetlights.

He felt good, perhaps for the first time all day. The nervousness and anxiety that had plagued him from the moment he reported on-shift at the hospital gave way before the nose-pinching odors of slopped beer, unflushed piss, and the subtle intoxication of male flesh...”<sup>184</sup>

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The GSA newsletter, *Wet Times*, functions like many other organization newsletters [fig. 3.21]. In the first issue of the year 1983, handwritten and Xeroxed on pale yellow paper, announcements are made regarding upcoming events (an upcoming Circus Night to benefit the Gay Men’s Health Crisis, an April Showers party, a “wet and wild” weekend, a “Tides of March” party), elections, and personal announcements “George B. I’ll think of you in San Francisco.” Also in the newsletter is an anonymous

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<sup>184</sup> Lew Hollings, *Butch Stud* (San Diego, CA: Greenleaf Classics, 1973), 19.



drawing depicting a group of men (shown in aerial perspective) gathering around the edge of a tub. In the tub a figure, long-haired, mouth open, relaxes in the stippled water. The faucet of the tub is rendered in the likeness of the cock and balls of the men surrounding the tub. The liquid is not tub water, but urine. Although liquid is not drawn coming out of the many genitalia the caption helps a viewer imagine the act of urination – “I’m singing in the rain, just singing in the rain.”

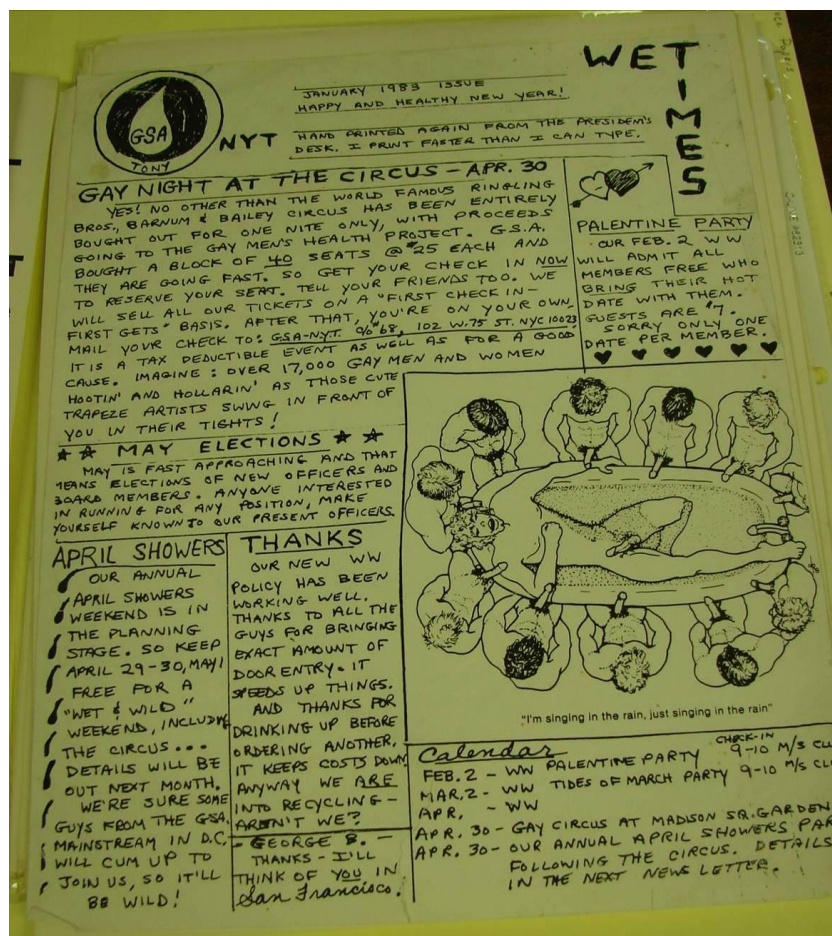


Figure 3.21: *Wet Times* [GSA nyt newsletter], January, 1983.

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In the trailer for William Friedkin's 1980 film *Cruising*, a shot of a brightly flashing American flag is immediately followed by a close-up of a yellow hanky hanging out of a back left pocket. As the camera pans up it is revealed that the hanky belongs to Al Pacino's character – an undercover cop trying to solve a series of murders within the gay leather world.

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A poster for GSA's 1984 April Showers party referenced the George Orwell novel of the same name, the slogan of the party being "Piss on Big Brother." For the event poster leather artist Greg depicts a city of skyscrapers dramatically falling away in two-point perspective [fig. 3.22]. On a grid-like ground, whose horizon meets the city but doesn't adhere to its perspectival rules, five men drink, bathe and piss. One is pumping his dick and a sixth figure is implied by a stream of liquid coming from off left. The central figure is shackled in a half-cube, the urine flowing off of his body and towards the bottom of the image, forming a frame around the title of the weekend-long party – "April Showers '84."



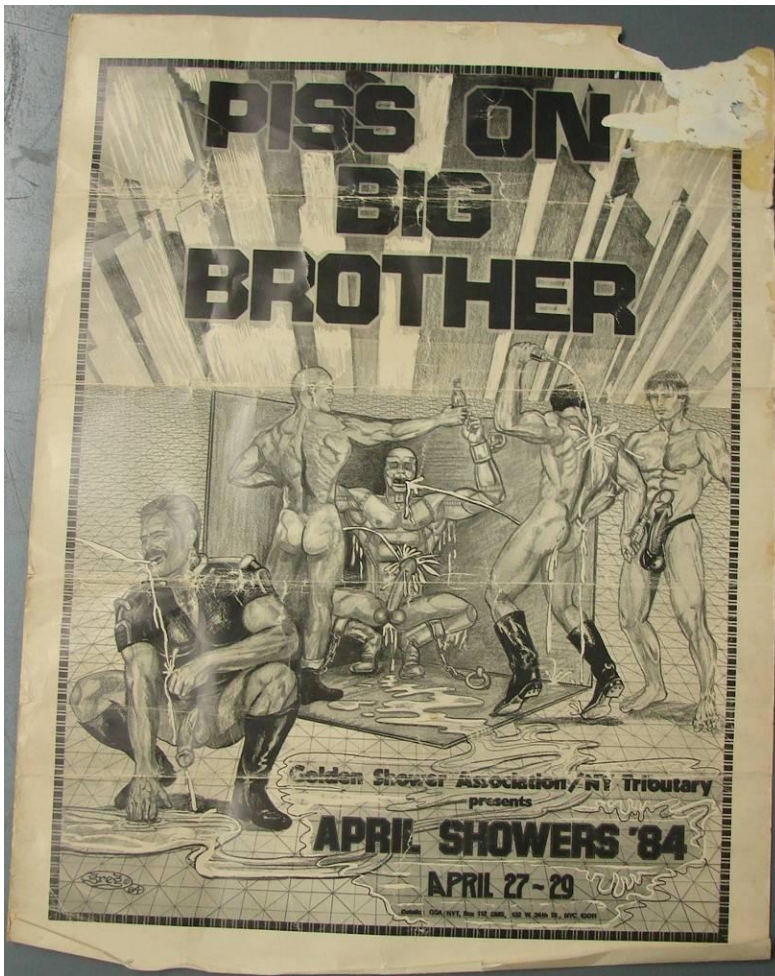


Figure 3.22: “Piss on Big Brother” poster, 1984.

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“Everybody started watching to see what [Camille O’Grady would] do next. Predictably unpredictable, she did ‘Toilet Kiss,’ destined to become her best-known number to date. ‘That particular song is one of the few I’ve written that was more inspired by somebody telling me something than by my own experience. I’ve never had a blow job in a bathroom – for obvious reasons. But when a friend of mine told me this story I just got a picture, an image, and wrote a poem about it. Everyone involved in writing has to put himself in a situation. It

isn't so much *imagining* or *analyzing* what it would be like; it's [snaps fingers] there you are, and there are the impressions. It's like a psychic exercise.'"<sup>185</sup>

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"For those into water sports, Larry's toilets are provided with steel collars and double sets of shackles strategically located... Although not all the customer's are participants, the percentage of those active in discipline, humiliation, bondage, water sports, and/or scat is higher than practically anywhere in the country... The lights are dim... Tuesday evening is Bandana Night, a special evening for one to denote his sex practice by the color and placement of his bandana."<sup>186</sup>

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"The mass in the bathtubbed room makes no lines and uses no real toilets. The beer flows, flows and flows. All the way through. Recycled to a glowing yellow. Good to the last drop."<sup>187</sup>

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A black and white photograph shows a man peeing on another man wearing a Harvard t-shirt [fig. 3.23]. The man who is being peed on opens his mouth and leans in towards stream of urine. The golden showers receiver, mustachioed with a receding hairline, rests on a motorcycle, only the faintest hint of which can be seen behind his head. A strong light comes from the upper right and spotlights the very place where the piss hits the gray t-shirt. The stunted arc of liquid is luminous, sparkling and suspended in midair, looking less like urine than liquid diamonds. The men pictured are Ken Brown (wearing the Harvard t-shirt) and Keith Anthoni, two actors in Joe Gage's *El Paso*

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<sup>185</sup> Eva Sachs, "Camille O'Grady," *Christopher Street* 2, no. 9 (1978): 20.

<sup>186</sup> William Wulfwine, "Drummer Visit's Larry's," *Drummer* 1, no. 4 (1976): 49-51.

<sup>187</sup> "Men's Bar Scene: Pure Trash," *Drummer* 4, no.31 (1979): 74-75.

*Wrecking Corp.* (1977/8). The film is second in Gage's "Working Man's Trilogy" which includes *Kansas City Trucking Co.* (1976) and *L.A. Tool & Die* (1979).



Figure 3.23: John Preston, still from *El Paso Wrecking Corp.* (Dir: Joe Gage, 1977/8).

The 8x10 photo was taken by John Preston, who wrote articles for *The Advocate* and other gay publications in the 1970s, and served as a still image for *El Paso Wrecking Corp.* Often these images were available for purchase individually or as a collection in a thin bound volume via *Drummer* or brick-and-mortar leather stores.

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An anonymous photo of the exterior of the Gold Coast bar, probably taken at some point in the mid-eighties, places the famous Chicago bar in its urban context [fig. 3.24]. The photo, taken in the gloaming, reveals the lights outside and inside the bar. Hanging off the corner of the building is a painted white wooden sign bearing the name of the bar. The entrance to the bar is flanked on the right by another painted wooden sign, this one vertical in orientation, the name of the bar written in raised gold letters on a red ground. A red floodlight shines from the top of the sign, illuminating the sign as well as the ground directly beneath the sign in a glow of red. Above the entrance hangs a blue neon sign reading “Home of International Mr. Leather.” Looking into the entrance hallway a yellow green light appears on the back wall – which may in fact be a part of one of Etienne’s numerous murals, many of which make use of aureoles of represented light. On the ground in the hallway, another pool of red light.



Figure 3.24: Anonymous, Gold Coast exterior, c. 1984.

Above the bar and on the street that leads perspectively back into an outcropping of highrises, yellow orange lights dot the landscape. Street lamps, interior light shining through windows, and lamps illuminating buildings share a similar color. In opposition to the multi-colored lighting design of the Gold Coast bar, these lights appear generic. They are the ground against which the bar is defined.

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Another panel of the modular mural created by Etienne for the Gold Coast bar in Chicago features a portrait of Chuck Renslow, a self-portrait of Dom Orejudos and a generic leatherman standing above them [fig. 3.25]. The pictorial space that the figures occupy is shallow and non-naturalistic. To the upper left an arrow contains the words

“Pit” which referred the basement level of the Gold Coast, an area known for sexual encounters. The image is divided over two panels and when the murals were disassembled, the bottom part eventually made its way, through Renslow’s donation, to the Leather Archives & Museum where it is currently installed in the auditorium. A 1998 condition report on this panel speculates that the yellow color might be related to smoke/moisture damage in the Gold Coast and Eagle bars, but also recognizes that the color yellow was also a deliberate choice on the part of the artist: “Apart from black, the principal colors of the painting are yellow and a very orange-hued brown...The use of yellow is so prevalent that parts of Etienne’s face, especially the ear and neck, look almost jaundiced.”<sup>188</sup>

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<sup>188</sup> Dan Atwell, “Notes on repairing idealized portrait of Dom and Chuck,” (November 1998): 1. Collection of Leather Archives & Museum, Chicago, IL.





Figure 3.25: Etienne, modular mural for the Gold Coast [detail], c. 1975.

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“No amount of disinfectant could negate the smell of man-piss that assaulted his nostrils. Like the layers of four-letter words and phone numbers scrawled on the scarred wall to his left, the stench had been accumulating for almost ninety years. But to Cal, the heady smell of old piss rushed to his head and quickened his pulses like a good whiff of poppers...An uncovered ceiling light, dim and dusty, lighted the area of the urinals. Beyond that, a vast area deep in shadows. Cal felt the urge to relieve himself and joined the non-pissers at the urinals...Cal faced

four wooden stall, their doors ripped away years ago. Even in that dim light he could see the crude holes cut in the battered wooden partitions dividing them.”<sup>189</sup>

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Appearing on the back of issue eighteen of *Drummer* magazine, a small case of Rush poppers manufactured by Pac West Distributing (PWD) is reproduced photographically [fig. 3.26]. Poppers, or amyl nitrite (amongst other alkyl nitrites), when inhaled relax smooth muscle tissue – including sphincter muscles. This relaxes the channels through which blood flows, increasing heart rate and thus the flow of blood through the body, creating an experience of a “rush” – which, perhaps unsurprisingly, shows up here in the product’s name.



Figure 3.26: Rush advertisement, *Drummer* [back cover], 1977.

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<sup>189</sup> Mark Deering, *Backroom Hunk* (New York: Surey Books, 1984), 48-51. Here the narrator is describing a bar named The Frazier Hotel or “the Frazier.”



As described by *Time* magazine in 1978, “the popper fad began among homosexuals, who first used amyl nitrite to enhance sexual pleasure. The drug dilates blood vessels, lowers blood pressure and, by distorting time perceptions, gives a sense of prolonging orgasm.”<sup>190</sup> By 1977 PWD reported retail sales in excess of \$20 million.<sup>191</sup>

The plastic case in the advertisement is screened with the product’s logo and name – a combination of a yellow band with red writing and a red lightning bolt design. Inside the plastic casing are five poppers – tiny glass ampoules concealed by cotton batting and held together by a yellow netting bound at both ends. The visual effect is one of tiny corncobs. These would be broken, popped, and inhaled directly or inserted into naral or bi-naral inhalers which would ideally contain the vapor and prolong the use of each popper.

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Sean, like many leather artists of the 1970s, made money by cheaply reproducing his work for mail-order sale. Often lithographs produced on 8 ½ x 11” heavy card stock,

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<sup>190</sup> “Rushing to a New High Poppers with a Risky Bang,” *Time* 112, no. 3 (July 17, 1978): 16.

<sup>191</sup> Ibid. For a comprehensive history of the medical, entrepreneurial and corporate development and sale of poppers see David Reed, “The Multimillion-Dollar Mystery High,” *Christopher Street* 3, no. 7 (Feb. 1979): 21-28. In his article Reed traces the ways in which juridical intervention (either general ignorance of nitrites being used as inhalants, or outright bans on poppers) worked in tandem with corporate advertising campaigns to corner a narrow market of gay men. Reed is, unlike most commentators on Poppers, incredibly balanced in his approach, pointing out potential side effects good and bad. For example, he notes that “Those who like poppers express surprisingly consistent reasons: feelings of power and aggressiveness, reduced fear and pain levels, giddiness, higher sensitivity to music and pulsing rhythms, increased sexual excitement and responsiveness, and a general sense of time being slowed down, leading to an illusion of prolonged orgasm,” while “Those who dislike poppers report equally bad consistent reasons for their stand: bad odor, pounding headache, dizziness, nausea, disturbingly fast heartbeat, pressure on the eyes, and hacking cough” (26). Poppers brands would advertise in unconventional ways, for example Hardware Liquid Aroma sponsored a contestant’s entry into the 1980 International Mr. Leather contest in Chicago, Joseph Lo Presti (mentioned in the seventh chapter).

these prints often were sold through newsletters, leather organizations, leather shops and magazines. One series Sean created consisted of about half a dozen lithographs printed on “top quality golden art stock” and depicted, in the words of one ad’s copy “a most popular pastime” of water sports. This series was produced and copyrighted by the Leather Fraternity, a leather mail-order ad service, and Things Unlimited in 1978. Perhaps unsurprisingly, Sean often was contracted out by these same mail-order leather goods companies to illustrate their products [fig. 3.27]. Oftentimes the products, which were medical in nature (enema bags and IV bags with catheters – themselves accessories to the activity of water sports), were filled out with lean muscular men activating the items for sale.

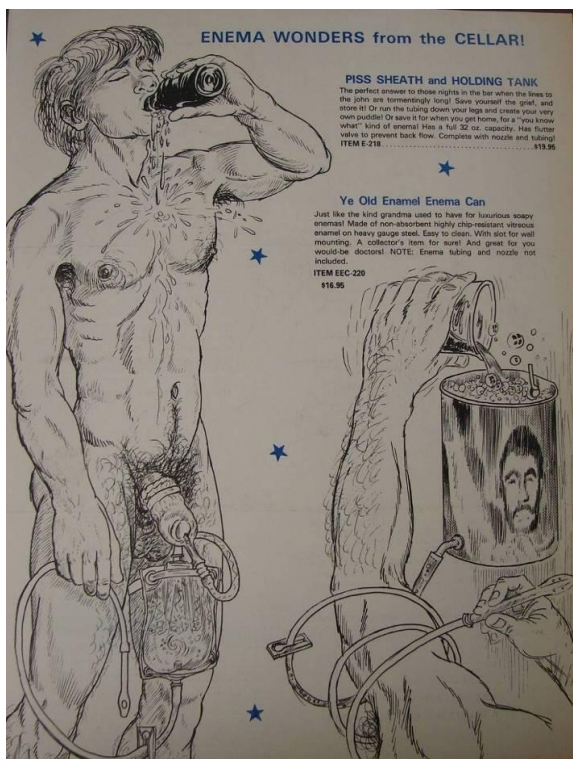


Figure 3.27: Sean, illustrations for The Cellar catalog, c. 1977 .

One of these five lithographs, produced in an edition of 500, shows two construction workers at play [fig. 3.28]. One stands, holding a beer in his right hand and looks down at the other worker, who is skillfully drinking the piss of the standing man. The hard hats, plain t-shirts, jeans, workboots and metal lunchbox indicate their profession, but in a way that is cliché and identifiable. Hanging out of the back right pocket of the man being pissed on is a handkerchief – a necessity when working outside, but also when trying to signal golden shower play. By virtue of the paper color, the hanky is yellow.

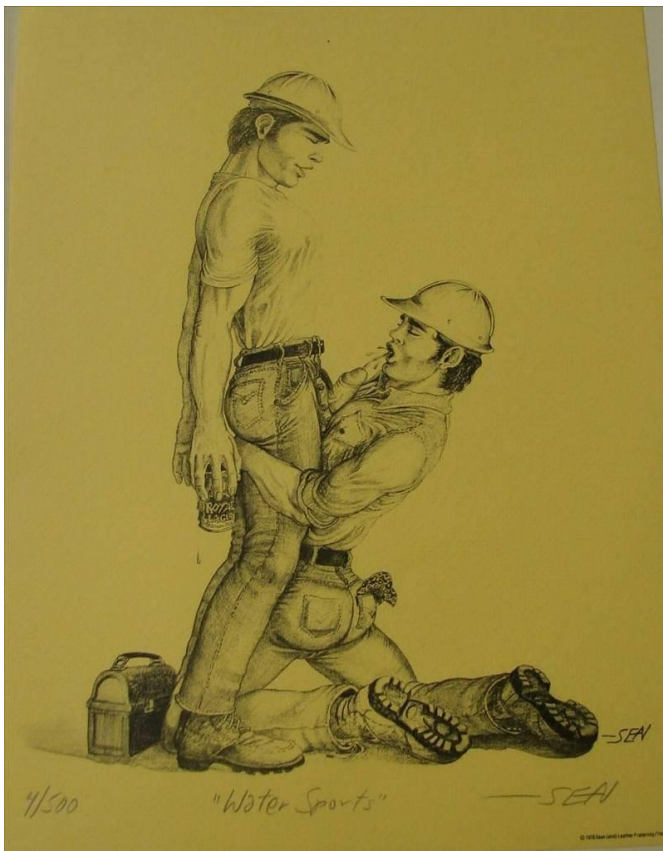


Figure 3.28: Sean, lithograph from “Water Sports” series, c. 1978.

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The San Francisco artist Chuck Arnett created the poster design for the Red Star Saloon [fig. 3.29] which “found their way onto the john walls of leather maniacs everywhere.”<sup>192</sup> For the poster Arnett drew three figures, one lies horizontally atop an open toilet, hands bound behind the porcelain bowl, while his knees rest on the shoulders of a second kneeling figure. The kneeling man, whose tumescent penis is virtually the size of his own calf, vigorously fists the man lying horizontally. A third figure straddles the bound man’s lower torso and points his urinating cock into the submissive’s mouth. All men have tattoos: stars, anchors, a butterfly, a logo for a fist fucking club.

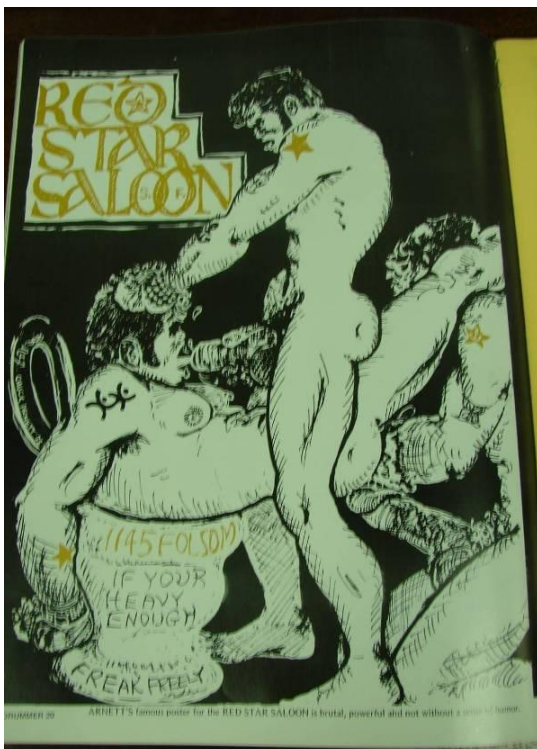


Figure 3.29: Chuck Arnett, poster for Red Star Saloon, c. 1970.

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<sup>192</sup> Robert Opel, “Arnett: Lautrec in Leather,” *Drummer* 1, no. 4 (Jan./Feb. 1976): 19.

Reproduced as posters and also as advertisements in leather publications like *Drummer* magazine, the image became famous.<sup>193</sup> When the image was reproduced as part of Bob Opel's article on Arnett in *Drummer*, a dusty gold color accented the graphic black and white drawn image. The name and address of the bar are rendered in gold, as well as the star tattoo on each of the three figures. Although the name of the bar indicates that these are meant to be red stars, they are gold instead. It is not coincidental that there are two sexual activities depicted in Arnett's poster, fisting and golden showers – linguistically the word red buttresses the activity of fisting while the color yellow points to piss play.

Arnett felt strongly about the distribution and display of his work: "Galleries are funeral parlors for art work... I show my work in the bar because that's where the people who know me go and can get off on what I do and sometimes even buy something."<sup>194</sup>

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Hailing from San Francisco, a man known as Chuck "the Golden Shower Queen" had a full set of leathers done in yellow and, apocryphally, would only eat yellow food at Hamburger Mary's.<sup>195</sup>

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<sup>193</sup> Jack Fritscher, "Artist Chuck Arnett: His Life/Our Times," in *LeatherFolk*, ed. Mark Thompson (Boston, MA: Alyson Publications, 1991), 106-118.

<sup>194</sup> Opel (1976), 19. Indeed, Opel notes that the original drawings for the posters hang in frames in the Red Star Saloon, and were priced at \$200 each.

<sup>195</sup> Rubin (1994), 169-170.

subway swinging  
metal doors  
grille window  
poster speaker  
bowls full  
bowls full  
of unflushed imaginations  
words in whispers  
careful signals  
over water's hiss  
cardinal cop  
skips a beat  
when he wants to get off  
to get off the street  
porcelain  
and  
piss  
pants slip down  
to boots  
crumpled leg halo  
dirt tile tracks  
pencil scribbling  
perfect timing  
rushing chrome faucet  
mouths full  
rushing  
rushing  
rushing  
porcelain  
and  
piss

waiting for that  
toilet kiss  
toilet kiss

liquid circles  
shooting solids  
fashioned by oral grip  
flushed face  
temple throb  
radiator

*steam cubicle*  
*no next door*  
*skinful*  
*skinful*  
*skinful*  
*porcelain and piss*  
*perfect release*  
*toilet kiss*  
*toilet kiss*<sup>196</sup>

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“Jack was kind enough to forward ‘Toilet Kiss’ to you at my request. He (fortunately for me) has archived me over the years. Hadn't seen it in a long time; it still works for me in saying what I thought it did at the time. I used to perform it with 3 rings of a silver bell (a la the Catholic mass) intro and I sang it in Gregorian chant, usually a Capella, or with a synthesized liturgical (organ!) backup. Hope you are enjoying yourself, wherever you are...”<sup>197</sup>

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The Chicago Hellfire Club was founded in 1971 and was named by Gayle Rubin “the single most influential of the gay male SM organizations.”<sup>198</sup> The organization held its first outdoor Inferno party (Inferno V) in 1976. Inferno was, essentially, a form of a club run – an event held out-of-doors by a particular motorcycle club usually over a period of a couple days that included beer drinking, eating, socializing and fucking. What made Inferno unique was its concentration on technique workshops and demonstrations of the variegated acts of fucking, including golden showers and water sports.

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<sup>196</sup> Camille O’Grady, “Toilet Kiss,” Jack Fritscher archives.

<sup>197</sup> Camille O’Grady, e-mail message to author, July 15, 2012.

<sup>198</sup> Rubin (1994), 144.

One photograph, taken circa 1979 or after, shows a man lying in a tub wearing a white jockstrap and a yellow tank top [fig. 3.30]. He is masturbating and looking down instead of at the camera. Above and behind him a man dressed in leather shorts, a black t-shirt, a black leather vest and aviator sunglasses has taken out his cock and is peeing on the man in the tub. The man in the tub has slightly moved his head to his right so that the standing man's stream hits his chest. On the edge of the bathtub stands a can of beer, another can is placed on the ground behind the figures and on the left of the composition. The ground is browned and dried grass, suggesting a summer season.<sup>199</sup> To the left of the tub, light gleams off of the ground, suggesting that liquid has pooled unabsorbed by the ground. A tent maze-like structure surrounds the figures, made of temporary canvas walls, clip-on lights and wooden furniture. In the background (in an area suffused in a glowing yellow light) more people stand, are held down and restrained on a leather table, or mill about.

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<sup>199</sup> Inferno has traditionally been held in September or over Labor Day weekend.





Figure 3.30: Anonymous, the tub at Inferno, c. 1979.

On the pissing man's leather vest is a patch of the Chicago Hellfire Club colors [fig. 3.31]. The design features a silhouetted gauntlet in front of a crossed whip and mace encircled by a black chain, which is in turn, encircled by gold embroidery. In the center of the gauntlet is a number, often rendered in yellow thread as the number 13, the number of the original founding members of the Chicago Hellfire Club. The ginkgo-leaf shape of the patch is unique amongst club colors.



Figure 3.31: Chicago Hellfire Club colors.

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Ginkgo leaves turn bright yellow in the Fall.

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Beer ranges in color from a pale yellow to a dark golden brown.

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Urine ranges in color from clear to dark gold.

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Amyl Nitrite is colorless, Butyl Nitrite is faintly yellow and oily.

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Rush poppers cornered a significant share of the poppers market by the late 1970s, and some attribute this to the use of the advertising character of Captain Rush, a white dark-haired superhero, whose outfit featured the colors yellow and red, a color scheme shared by Rush's logo and product design [fig. 3.32].<sup>200</sup> In a series of short episodic advertisements bought by Rush to adorn the back cover of *Drummer* magazine issues twelve through fifteen, Captain Rush worked tirelessly to defeat the Zorro-like Brandex, and the silver-headed Bullit (a play on a competitor brand – which coincidentally also used a superhero figure to sell their product). The comic often played off of the real dangers of poppers. For example, in one episode Captain Rush saves helpless people from a fire started by the dastardly Brandex – low flashpoints being one of the risks of nitrites [fig. 3.33].

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<sup>200</sup> Reed, 22. Reed points to Rush's "superman-type figure" as instrumental to PWD's success.



Figure 3.32: Rush advertisement, *Drummer* [back cover], no. 11, 1976.





Figure 3.33: Rush advertisement [Brandex], *Drummer* [back cover], no. 15, 1977.

Fortuitously for the PWD, the first of the Superman films starring Christopher Reeve was released in 1978, a couple years after the debut of Captain Rush. Rush's

competitors played off of the brand's seemingly self-conscious alignment with the superman character – one competitor brand in particular, Crypt Tonight, was a linguistic pun on Superman's weakness, Kryptonite.

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A. Jay, aka Al Shapiro, called the “WS arteest supremo”<sup>201</sup> by Jack Fritscher, often created the graphics for The Cauldron, a club in San Francisco that opened in 1979 and closed in 1984.<sup>202</sup> Gayle Rubin describes the Cauldron as: “Primarily a watersports venue, although fisting, SM, and rough sex were also featured.”<sup>203</sup> One small flyer, created in 1980 and used as admission for “Another Hot Piss Pig Party” features three figures, one man sits on a toilet, while another bends over to give a blowjob to the seated figure [fig. 3.34]. He, in turn is being fucked by another man who is standing. Fluids drip everywhere. Semen or urine explodes in a torrent of firework-like droplets from each of the men's cocks. The standing and seated man sweat from their foreheads. The standing man spits all over the man in front of him; his spit, most likely beer he had recently swigged, runs down his target's shoulder. Beer cans are strewn along the floor of the bathroom, the pipe from the toilet leaks, and a jockstrap lies limply curled around a beer can serving as a footrest for the man seated on the closed toilet. A small bottle of poppers sits on the corner of the toilet tank.

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<sup>201</sup> Jack Fritscher, e-mail message to author. c. 2009.

<sup>202</sup> When *Drummer* moved its production from Los Angeles to San Francisco Al Shapiro served as art director alongside Jack Fritscher who was Editor-in-chief.

<sup>203</sup> Rubin (1994), 247.

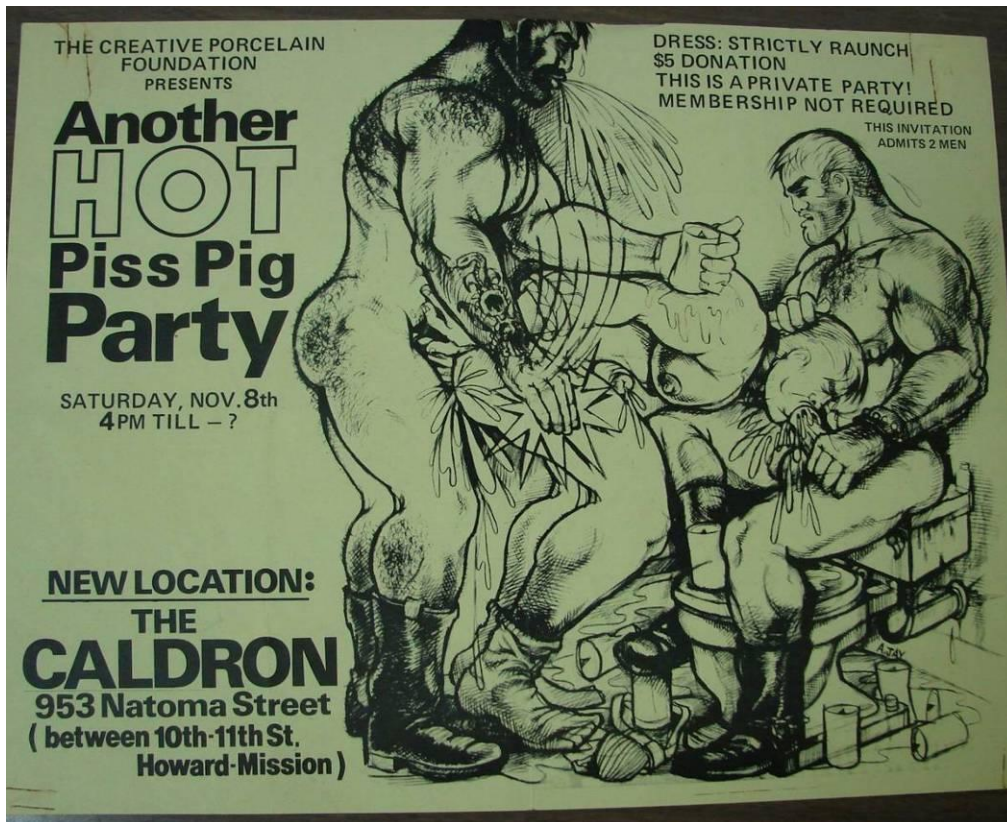


Figure 3.34: A. Jay, Flyer for “Another Hot Piss Pig Party”, 1980.

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A small drawing by Chuck Arnett that now resides in the Leather Archives & Museum sketches out a piss fantasy [fig. 3.35]. The drawing features a man, placed centrally, peeing into a urinal. Drawn in ink, the man is differentiated from his sketchy black and white setting though the selective use of watercolor. The urinal he uses is yellow – a product of the golden liquid it carries? – as well as the plumbing that leads through the wall and into the open mouth of a head at the lower right portion of the image. Here the yellow urine stains everything it touches in a non-naturalistic way, from the urinal to the receiver’s mouth. Floating above and through the dividing wall is the disembodied head of a construction worker, possibly indicating that Arnett is reusing a



scratch piece of drawing paper. The drawing is labeled on the back as most likely a life-drawing.



Figure 3.35: Chuck Arnett, *Untitled*, c. 1970.

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A. Jay on The Slot:



If you're into *very* heavy scenes, this *is* the tubs to hit!... You never know what far-out scenes you'll uncover here... everything from FFA activists, oily bodybuilders, jockstrap fetishists, uniformed studs, watersport enthusiasts, to just plain, everyday S/M action.<sup>204</sup>

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“During the Seventies and early Eighties, much of the gay press, including the most influential glossy publications, came to rely on poppers ads for a huge chunk of its revenue, and poppers became an accepted part of gay sex. There was even a comic strip called Poppers, by Jerry Mills. The unwritten agreement was almost never breached: poppers ads appeared only in gay publications. The few exceptions were women's magazines with a large gay male readership, like *Playgirl*.”<sup>205</sup>

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An ad for Natural Brute “room odorizer” shows how other companies relied on Rush’s brand identity to sell their own [fig. 3.36]. The bottle of Natural Brute is colored yellow, green and red, in comparison to Rush’s yellow and red scheme. Natural Brute also uses the iconography of a lightning bolt, which becomes the first letter of the brand name. The brand is advertised as the “aroma of man” – an idea that other brands such as Locker Room and Dirty Feet mirror in their own bandings. Such a statement seems to be at odds with the ad’s tagline, that Natural Brute will “bring out the beast in you.”

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<sup>204</sup> A. Jay, 25.

<sup>205</sup> Ian Young, “The Poppers Story: The Rise and Fall and Rise of ‘the Gay Drug’,” *Steam* 2, no. 4 (Winter 1994): 422.



Figure 3.36: Advertisement for Natural Brute, *Drummer* [back cover], no. 21, 1977.

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Natural Brute | Bolt | Bullet | Cat's Meow | Climax | Crypt Tonight | Cum | Dirty Feet | Hardware | Hiball | Jac Aroma | L-R | Liquid Incense | Locker Poppers | Locker Room | Oz | Pleasure Poppers | Quicksilver | Rush | Rush Amber | Thunder Ampoules | Satan's Scent

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An undated card from Mr. S Leathers [fig. 3.37], a leather goods store originally opened in England, titled Lesbian Hanky Code, lists yellow as signifying “Gives Golden Showers” if worn on the left side and “Wants Golden Showers” if worn on the right side. A mustard colored hanky is listed as signifying “Food Fetish, Top” if worn on the left side and “Food Fetish, Bottom” if worn on the right side.

Yellow and mustard are two of thirty-four options.



Figure 3.37: Mr. S Leathers, Lesbian Hanky Code, c. 1982.

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“He looked down, realizing he’d had his eyes closed, and saw rippling muscles in the dim light...”<sup>206</sup>

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“I write about all kinds of things, but people remember me for ‘Toilet Kiss,’ which pisses me off because that’s so one-dimensional!”<sup>207</sup>

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An advertisement for Hardware Liquid Aroma, portrays a mushroom cloud rising from the open blue and white bottle [fig. 3.38]. In the yellow, orange and red cloud are two faces, divided by a sinuous line of white smoke in states of ecstatic introspection. Their eyes are closed and their mouths open. The ad’s copy reads in chrome and yellow lettering “Intensely Powerful.”

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<sup>206</sup> Jack Stone, *The Leather Closet* (Miami, FL: Blueboy Library, 1978), 35.

<sup>207</sup> Sachs (quoting O’Grady), 23.

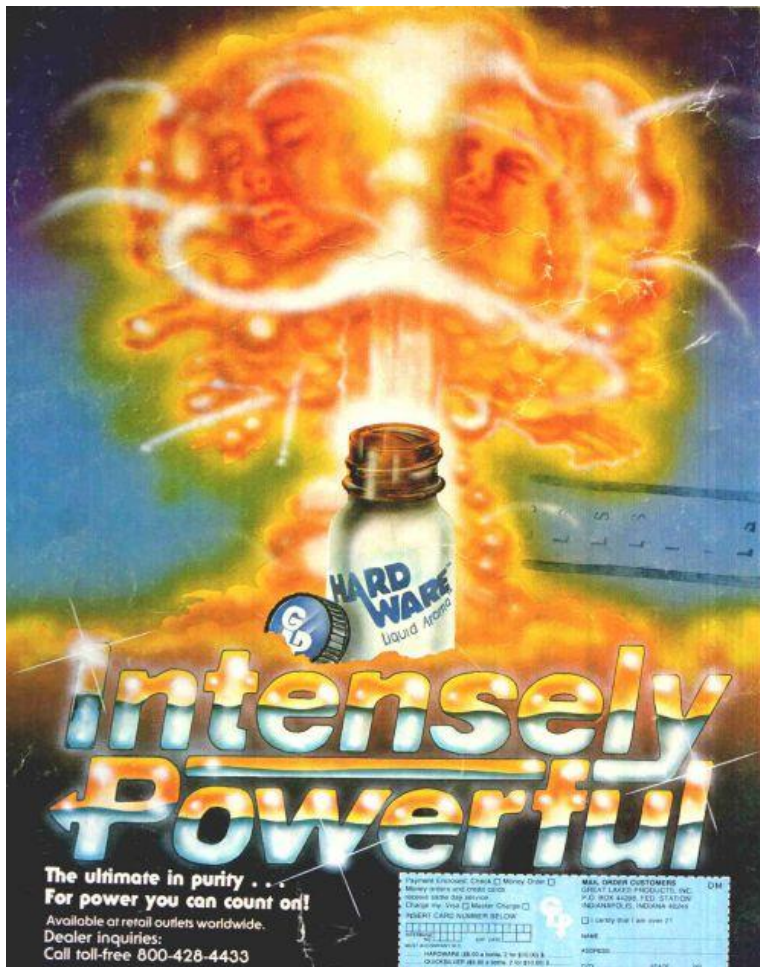


Figure 3.38: Advertisement for Hardware, c. 1979.

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“The sole light in the room came from the triangular lamp that hung over the pool table upon which many people were seated.”<sup>208</sup>

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<sup>208</sup> Duston Rose, *Golden Showers* (San Diego, CA: Surrey House, 1972), 130.

The November 19<sup>th</sup> 1985 cover of *Reactions*, a California-based magazine, features a drawing of poppers experience gone terribly wrong [fig. 3.39]. The proprietor of a gay bookstore, who is Death disguised in a fedora and tie, sells “Cheap Thrills” in the form of amyl/butyl nitrate and ethyl chloride. The gullible handsome male customer who has, we might assume, purchased and inhaled the bottle of poppers that falls to the lower right of the image, is in a state of extreme trauma. The top of his head explodes skyward in a chaos of red and yellow color. The poppers bottle falls to the floor spills yellow liquid in a sinuous line that bisects the exploding man’s torso.

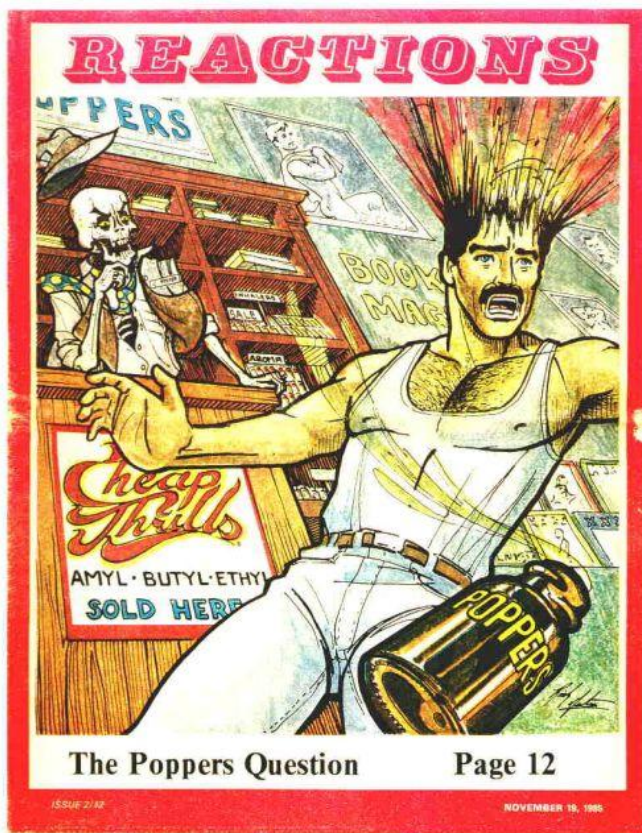


Figure 3.39: *Reactions* [cover], 1985.



The magazine also contained an anti-poppers article written by John Lauritsen.

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An undated flyer given out by the Pleasure Chest, a sex goods store in California (Los Angeles and San Francisco), titled “The World’s Most Comprehensive Hanky Code” [fig. 3.40], lists yellow as signifying “Pisser” if worn on the left and “Piss Freak” if worn on the right. Pale Yellow is listed as signifying “Spits” if worn on the left and “Drool Crazy” if worn on the right. Mustard is listed as signifying “Has 8” or More” if worn on the left and “Wants a Big One” if worn on the right. Gold is listed as “2 Looking for One” if worn on the left and “One Looking for 2” if worn on the right. Yellow with white stripes is listed as signifying “Likes Oriental Bottoms” if worn on the left and “Likes Oriental Tops” if worn on the right. Gold lamé is listed as signifying “Likes Bottom Musclemen” if worn on the left and “Likes Top Musclemen” if worn on the right.

Yellow, pale yellow, mustard, Gold, Yellow with white stripes, and gold lamé are six of fifty-eight options.

## THE PLEASURE CHEST Introduces the World's Most Comprehensive Hanky Code

HANKY COLOR	WORN ON LEFT	WORN ON RIGHT
Light Blue	Wants Head	Expert Cocksucker
Robin's Egg Blue	69-er	69-ee
Medium Blue	Cop	Cop-sucker
Navy Blue	Fucker	Fuckee
Teal Blue	Cock & Ball Torturer	Cock & Ball Torturee
Red	Fist Fucker	Fist Fuckee
Light Pink	Dildo Fucker	Dildo Fuckee
Dark Pink	Tit Torturer	Tit Torturee
Dark Red	2-handed Fister	2-handed Fistee
Maroon	Likes Menstruating Women	Woman Menstruating
Mauve	Into Navel Worshippers	Has Navel Fetish
Magenta	"Suck My Pits"	Armpit Freak
Purple	Piercer	Piercee
Lavender	Likes Drags	Drag
Yellow	Pisser	Piss Freak
Pale Yellow	Spits	Drool Crazy
Mustard	Has 8" or More	Wants a Big One
Gold	2 Looking for One	One Looking for 2
Orange	Anything Anytime	Nothing Now
Apricot	Two Tons o' Fun	Chubby Chaser
Coral	"Suck My Toes"	Shrimper
Rust	A Cowboy	His Horse
Fuchsia	Spanker	Spankee
Kelly Green	Hustler	John
Olive Drab	Military Top	Military Bottom
Hunter Green	Daddy	Hunting for Daddy
Lime Green	Dines off Tricks (Sex w/Food)	Dinner Plate
Beige	Rimmer	Rim mee
Brown	Scat Top	Scat Bottom
Brown Lace	Has Uncut Dick	Likes Uncut Dick
Brown Satin	Circumsized	Likes Circumsized Cock
Black	Heavy S&M Top	Heavy S&M Bottom
Gray	Bondage Top	Bondage Bottom
Charcoal	Latex Fetish Top	Latex Fetish Bottom
Gray Flannel	Actually Owns a Suit	Likes Men in Suits
White	"Beat My Meat"	"I'll Do Us Both"
Cream	Cums in Scum Bags	Sucks It Out
Red/White Stripe	Shaver	Shavee
Black/White Stripe	Likes Black Bottoms	Likes Black Tops
Brown/White Stripe	Likes Latino Bottoms	Likes Latino Tops
Yellow/White Stripe	Likes Oriental Bottoms	Likes Oriental Tops
White Lace	Likes White Bottoms	Likes White Tops
Paisley	Wears Boxer Shorts	Likes Boxer Shorts
Fur	Bestialist. Top	Bestialist. Bottom
Silver Lame	Starfucker	Star
Gold Lame	Likes Bottom Musclemen	Likes Top Musclemen
Leopard	Has Tattoos	Likes Tattoos
Tan	Smokes Cigars	Likes Cigars
Teddy Bear	Cuddler	Cuddlee
Kewpie Doll	Chicken	Chicken Hawk
Dirty Jockstrap	Wears a Dirty Jock	Sucks 'em Clean
Zip-Lock Baggy	Has Drugs	Looking for Drugs
Kleenex	Stinks	Sniffs
Handywipe	Gives HOT Motor Oil Massages	Wears It Well
Chamois	Rides a Motorcycle	Likes Bikers
Cocktail Napkin	Bartender	Bar Groupie
Dolly	Tearoom Top	Tearoom Bottom
Mosquito Netting	Top for Sex Outdoors	Bottom for Same



*The Pleasure Chest Ltd.*

7733 Santa Monica Boulevard

Figure 3.40: The Pleasure Chest, "The World's Most Comprehensive Hanky Code," c.1985.



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A man is bent over the pool table with his ass in the air, jeans pulled down to the upper thigh. A tub of Crisco and a 24-pack of beer rest on the surface of the pool table to the side of his upper body. In the distance is a pinball machine - the game is called Pirate's Gold. The whole photograph is suffused with red light except for the skin of the man which gives off an aureole of yellow-orange light [fig. 3.41].

I don't know who he is. I do know where he is.

He is in the Mineshaft, a leather bar in New York City open for a total of nine years and nine days. The Mineshaft was a complex of six rooms on two levels including a tub room for piss play and rooms for other forms of socializing. The bar has been described elsewhere in this chapter by Jack Fritscher. Represented here is one of the rooms used for socializing. But unlike a busy night when this room might be populated with bodies, no one is here, save for the man bent over the table.

Yes, this photograph seems irreducibly staged – the Crisco and beer on the table, the man presenting the viewer his ass, his head almost framed by the mirror on the back wall and offset by the pinball machine in the back left. This photograph is all presentation and iconography. The viewer positioned as fucker.

One of the many things that Wally Wallace (owner of the Mineshaft) was notorious for was his aversion to letting others photograph the interior of his business. This was as much to protect the mythology of the bar as it was to protect the identities of his patrons. So is this a publicity photograph that was never used? Or a vanity shot,

photographed and kept by Wally Wallace until his passing (and the photo's subsequent donation to the Leather Archives & Museum)?

I love this photograph because it is unique in what I perceive to be its accuracy. I say this having never been inside a 1970s leather bar. It is one of the few photographs that adheres to textual descriptions of the Mineshaft and other leather bars and clubs like it, especially in regards to the color and quality of the light in such spaces. My sense of a leather bar only comes through these textual descriptions – photography is largely untrustworthy, because the bright 1970s flash required to take a picture in such low-level lighted places ultimately flattens out space and makes more visible than would normally be the case. I say this having no memory of such places, but a historian's sense of place. Perhaps this photograph has become falsely emblematic for me of that particular category: leather bar. But it is useful in that regard, as it allows me to think through the thorny difficulties of representation and writing histories of such spaces. Some photographs are more suggestive than others. This photograph is suggestive in that it sets up the conditions and iconography of leather bars without purporting to be a document of a specific time or person - rather its effect is generalized. While we may know the specific space (The Mineshaft), the specific brand of lube (Crisco) and the name of the pinball machine (Pirate's Gold), the brand of beer is difficult to make out. We are presented with an unspecific ass. It is not the profusion of specific information that makes this photograph suggestive, rather it is the absence of such specifics.

I relate to this photograph in the same way I relate to the litany of the appearances of the color yellow. False and accurate, specific and general, this chapter's contents aren't easily squared. I invest in the stories this photograph tells with its clunky inclusion (a visual list, really) of the emblems of leathersex: ass, beer, Crisco, red light. It is here, in

the place that seems the most false, the most set-up, that my particularized historical placement as a leather researcher is most evident. The photographer builds out an iconography of leathersex: beer, golden showers, poppers, aspects of which appear throughout this chapter. Thus the photograph reads multiply: a picture of place, a relating of practice, and an opportunity to reflect on my position. That I do not know everything about this photograph, and that I have made it emblematic, is indicative of the very real challenges leather archives present (incompletion, anonymity) as well as my own removed temporal and geographic frame.

Red light defines space here, but so does the yellow-orange glow of the body which pushes out towards the viewer. So does the charismatic white shine of the chrome edging on the pool table, which iterates a horizontal edge the man leans on. This edge is overlapped by the dark perpendicular line of the man's ass-crack.

The pool table is repurposed. No longer just a surface for a game of pool, it is also a *place* to fuck.

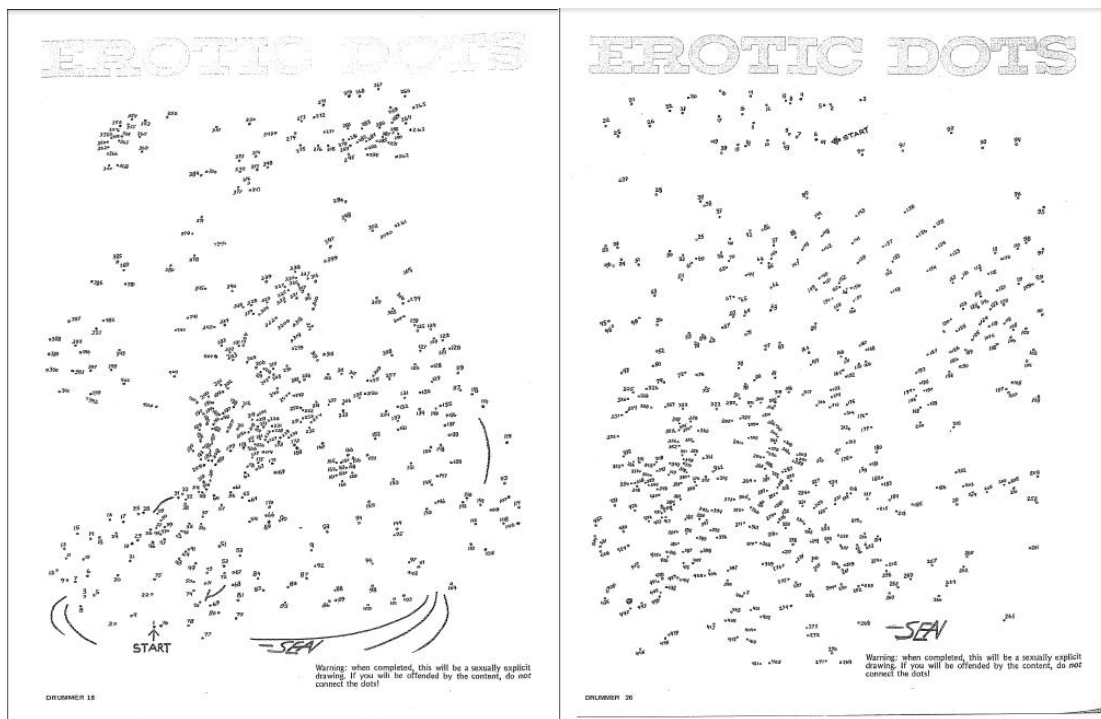


Figure 3.41: Anonymous, The Mineshaft [interior], c. 1979.

## Chapter 4: Leave Them Unconnected

### START

Before me are two erotic connect-the-dots activities created by the artist Sean (née John Klamik), which originally appeared in *Drummer* issues 13 and 16 respectively (both 1977) [figs. 4.1, 4.2]. A total of 851 dots waiting to be connected; but I have yet to begin.



Figures 4.1, 4.2: Sean, Erotic Dots, *Drummer*, both 1977.

New York and Berlin-based artist Dean Sameshima uses these two particular Sean connect-the-dots drawings as source material for his large-scale painting *Bodily Fluids* (2007) [fig. 4.3]. Sameshima's 60 x 76" painting is a tangle of yellow silkscreened numbers and dots on a white ground. Although there were eight total connect-the-dots paintings in Sameshima's 2007 exhibition entitled *Numbers* at Peres Projects, all completed in different colors, Sean made only seven Erotic Dots pictures for *Drummer*.

In *Numbers* the artist only used three of the seven total connect-the-dots images made by Sean.<sup>209</sup> *Numbers* also contained a small suite of paintings of cartoon urinals anthropomorphically conversing (also appropriated from *Drummer* magazine) and safety pins in sexual positions.



Figure 4.3: Dean Sameshima, *Bodily Fluids*, 2007. Acrylic and silk-screen ink on canvas, 60 x 76”.

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<sup>209</sup> While writing this chapter and in conversation with the artist, it became apparent that Sameshima had used three particular Sean connect-the-dots because he had only been able to collect/get a hold of three. As stated in my introduction, collecting can be a herculean task in regards to leather communities. During our email exchanges he requested that I send the other four I had found, and I happily did so. Sameshima then used these to make more paintings, which debuted at an exhibition entitled *Faggots* at Preteen Gallery in Mexico City, 2012.

Connect-the-dots is a familiar participatory form of image-making; often a common children's activity appearing in magazines such as *Highlights for Children* and other specialized activity books. The activity of connecting-the-dots is pretty straightforward; a participant is asked to begin at the number one, often indicated by a "start" arrow, and draw a continuous line connecting progressive integers. Connect-the-dots activities provide an opportunity for cognitive skill-building, a way of learning numbers and letters alongside using contextual clues to arrive at an image, sometimes even before the activity is completed. Sameshima's overlay of two different Sean connect-the-dots frustrates a viewer's ability to easily imagine the final drawn figure. But that's not the only way *Bodily Fluids* departs from its juvenile connect-the-dots cousins. The subject matter of Sameshima's paintings is, as one reviewer points out, "...far from childish."<sup>210</sup>

Berlin-based art critic Ana Honigman introduces Sameshima's connect-the-dots paintings in this way:

Heterosexuals often gush about how internet dating simplifies the sticky, tricky process of flirting with a stranger: after looking at someone's profile, preliminary introductions become much more efficient. But lists of preferences and tastes are far more reticent and archaic than the direct color code system gay men designed decades ago for streamlined cruising.<sup>211</sup>

Honigman is referring to the hanky code, which also provides the organizing color principle for Sameshima's connect-the-dot paintings. She makes a division between contemporary heterosexual dating technologies and historic gay systems of signaling

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<sup>210</sup> Laura Allsop, "What He Loved: Dean Sameshima," *Art Review*, no. 10 (April 2007): 34.

<sup>211</sup> Ana Finel Honigman, "Dean Sameshima talks to Ana Finel Honigman," *Saatchi Online Magazine* (April 24, 2007). Web. Accessed July 6, 2012.

potential sex partners, describing the latter as more “streamlined” and less “archaic.” Her resurrection of the hanky code sets the tone for an interview between critic and artist that follows, which often touches upon affective traumatic loss surrounding HIV/AIDS and the safe sex practices that came in the wake of the initial spread of HIV amongst gay men.<sup>212</sup>

Honigman’s discussion of the hanky code also directly reflects Sameshima’s artistic concerns in his connect-the-dot paintings. In a similar vein as Christian Holstad’s use of Larry Townsend’s *The Leatherman’s Handbook*, Peres Projects in consultation with the artist made Xerox copies of the Pleasure Chest’s “World’s Most Comprehensive Hanky Code” [fig. 3.40] available to viewers to aid in the deciphering of the color-codings of Sameshima’s paintings. Some of the artist’s titles, like *Bodily Fluids*, at first suggest but ultimately refuse to pinpoint a specific activity; bodily fluids could refer to any number of corporeal liquids (tears, ejaculate, urine, blood, spit, sweat, mucous, etc.). Yet the Pleasure Chest hanky code is unambiguous – yellow means “pisser” and “piss freak.”<sup>213</sup> The knot of yellow numbers, then, in accordance to a hanky code, becomes a reference to piss play, or golden showers.

The paintings do not consist of random colors of the hanky code, but according to another critic, Laura Allsop, “reflect the artist’s own sexual preferences.”<sup>214</sup> *Bodily Fluids*

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<sup>212</sup> Sameshima’s safety pin paintings punningly reference the idea of “safe” sex alongside punk rock fashion.

<sup>213</sup> The Pleasure Chest hanky code lists several variations of yellow colors, and so it may seem confusing which color is being used and directly referenced by Sameshima. Usually Sameshima gives overt cues through the titling, for example *2 Looking for One, One Looking for 2* (2007) is a diptych of green numbers painted on a gold field. The color referenced in the titling matches the Pleasure Chest’s exact wording for gold hanky.

<sup>214</sup> Allsop, 34.



and the other seven paintings in the series are then, in a sense, autobiographical – coded expressions of Sameshima’s own sexual practices. The artist is overtly signaling to his viewers, initiating an act of cruising; life-size paintings stand in for more portable fabric flags.

Knowing this, I return to my own Xeroxes of Sameshima’s source material. Dumb copies, I want to draw on them. Before coming upon Sameshima’s paintings, I had seen these drawings as a fun and tangential part of my larger research project. But *Bodily Fluids* asks me to invest as a historian, mostly because I (rightly or wrongly) assume that an artist like Sameshima is specific with his source material, and I take that seriously. This is also a useful place to follow-through with the metaphoric activity of history as “connecting-the-dots” – an urge I tried to counter in the previous chapter with its open, list format. It’s a way of performatively understanding Sameshima’s source material, and time-based alternative model for organizing the information contained here. I want to see where the connective line, the threads between the numbered points gets me.

I pick up my pen to begin.

## 83

At dot 83 both drawings begin to emerge from an otherwise incomprehensible mass of numbers [figs. 4.4, 4.5]. One began in the bottom left and by now a head is clearly discernable – rickety and sharp. The figure’s nose is a jagged curlicue, and it’s possible that the mouth is open as well, although ultimately difficult to tell. The drawing (my drawing?) lacks the soft fleshy corporeality of Sean’s drawings reproduced elsewhere in *Drummer* and discussed in the previous chapter. The second connect-the-dot

image began in the center top, and by now reveals three words “HOT BloW HOLE” topping two directional arrows.



Figures 4.4, 4.5: At dot 83...

I observe: getting to dot 83 was oddly slow-going. I wanted to be careful, studious in my approach to the task. Even so, I have more Xeroxes if I “mess up.” That’s already happened, by the way, but it wasn’t my fault. One of the connect-the-dots had no number 65! After concertedly looking for a few minutes I skipped to 66. What other choice did I have? Leaving the drawing incomplete at this stage seemed counterproductive.

Unlike Sean, who unintentionally left out a particular number in one of his connect-the-dots, Sameshima intentionally leaves out important textual elements from his original source material. One of these is the heading, “Erotic Dots,” which exclaims that

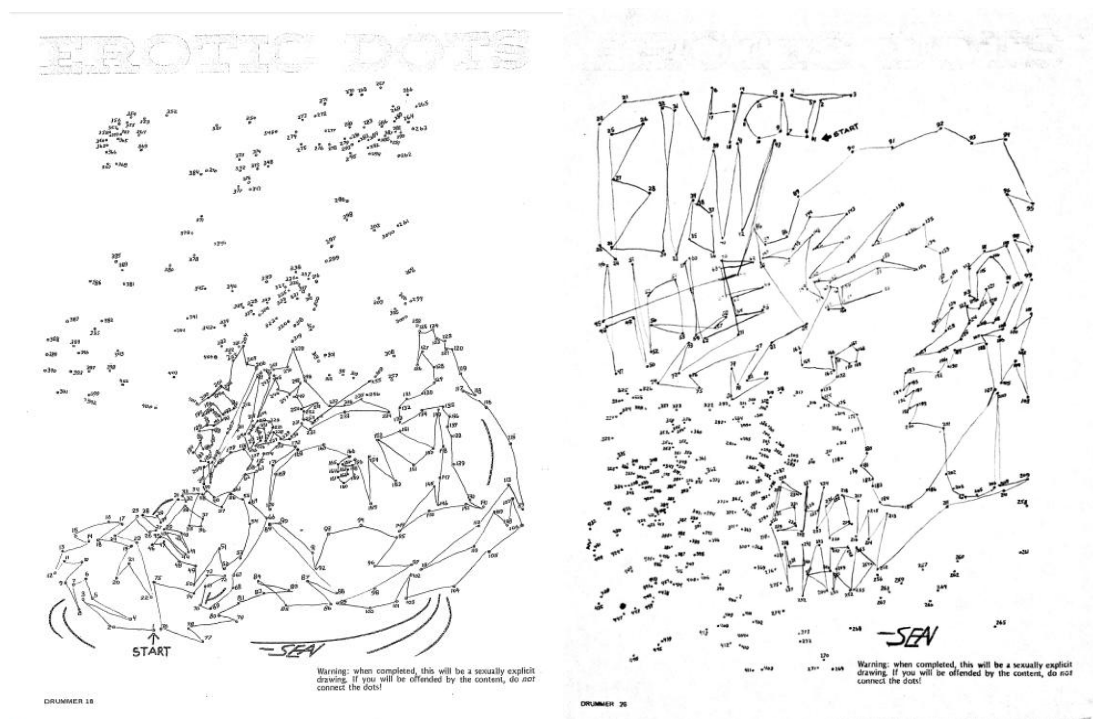
when complete the connect-the-dots images will be erotic in nature. In case a reader of *Drummer*, who would expect erotic content, doesn't understand fully the implications of this heading a small warning text is appended at the bottom of the Sean's drawings. It reads, "Warning: when completed, this will be a sexually explicit drawing. If you will be offended by the content, do *not* connect the dots!" This is a strange warning to issue to a reader of *Drummer* as Sean's connect-the-dots drawings sit pages away from photographs and drawings of oral sex, golden showers, branding, enema play, rope bondage, and boot worship. Sameshima leaves out Sean's warning. The final textual element left out by Sameshima is Sean's signature, perhaps reassigning Sean's authorship. But Sameshima doesn't excise all text, he leaves in the word "start" with its attendant arrow symbol. Perhaps because the arrow and the word "start" orient a viewer and furthermore indicates that two drawings have been overlain by Sameshima.

Sameshima's excision of the mechanical type and Sean's signature is indicative of his working method, which consists of *tracing* enlarged Xeroxes of Sean's connect-the-dot images onto acetate. Once done, the acetate is exposed to light along with an emulsion-covered screen; the result is a large negative that ink can be pulled through. Importantly, Sean's connect-the-dot images are not photomechanically reproduced to make a screen (i.e. Xeroxed directly onto large pieces of acetate), but are rather traced and drawn. Through this process Sean's reproduced image becomes Sameshima's drawing. In insisting on tracing Sean's connect-the-dots activities Sameshima is engaged in a different process of drawing than the one I'm engaged in. Sameshima re-draws the artist's drawing, the numbered points of contact which allow a viewer to draw for themselves. Sameshima thus presents a trace-ing of history – a re-embodiment; one that

contains or indexes the source documents and changes them through the process of re-drawing, thereby creating an entirely different object.

255

At this point I think I know what the emerging drawings will be [figs. 4.6, 4.7]. One is an image of auto-fellatio (also referred to as self-suck) and the other a blowjob through an anonymous glory-hole. Of course, I could be wrong, and that's why I'm going to keep going.



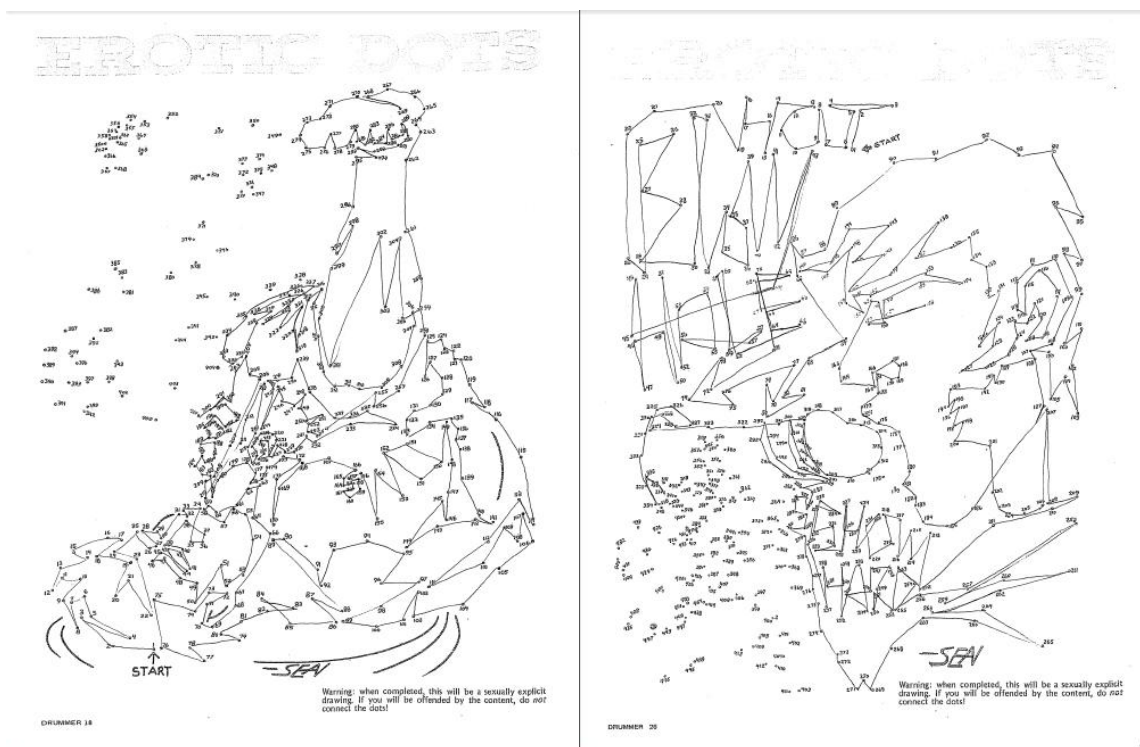
Figures 4.6, 4.7: At dot 255...

Several things occur to me at this stage in the process. The first is that I've now made a couple of mistakes. I connected a line to dot number 188 instead of dot number 108, for example. Sean has too, as there are two dots labeled 151 in the self-suck image.

Not knowing quite what to do I connect both to the previous and subsequent numbered dots, creating a closed diamond right below the figure's thumb. The third thing that occurs to me is that I have yet to see pictorial evidence of bodily fluids in *Bodily Fluids*.

337

My initial suspicions as to the content of Sean's connect-the-dots are confirmed by now [figs. 4.8, 4.9]. Indeed, the self-suck image now is outfitted with an upraised leg and foreshortened foot. The outline of a cock and a hole cut through a shallow divider are visible in the other drawing. Still missing are the bodily fluids – which now seem impossible to draw in given the meager number of dots left. It is at this point, and, perhaps prematurely, that I come to the conclusion that Sameshima's titling is a riff on the hanky code colors he uses and unconnected to the content of Sean's latent images. Sean's images function for Sameshima metaphorically, as spaces for imaginative projection. I stop drawing.



Figures 4.8, 4.9: At dot 337...

Another path may be more fruitful. I begin to think about the title of Sameshima's exhibition (and of this particular series of connect-the-dots paintings), "Numbers." This was a term made famous John Rechy, whose novel of the same name was discussed in the first chapter. Sameshima has made silkscreens of photographs of John Rechy and names the author as an important influence, and so the double meaning of numbers, integer and trick, is intentional. In this context, Sameshima's numbered dots are representative of a different type of embodiment via dots and lines – they are now hundreds of men, perhaps seen from above in the cruising grounds of Griffith Park. Because the numbers are doubled in *Bodily Fluids*, the question becomes who is whose *number*? Which "3" follows which "2"? Are lines drawn between dots descriptive of intensity of contact, distance travelled, a chronological accounting?

These new lines I'm imaginarily drawing flow irrespective of numerical order, but begin to describe a net of social relationships. They create images that are more abstract; uneven body traces are replaced with asymmetrical asterisks and chevron switch-backs. The relationships/connections between the numbered dots are descriptive of different choreographies of being-with... some numbers are isolated with no others nearby, some are caught in an orgiastic stew.

These patterns remind me of Sameshima's uneven genealogy of gay and queer forbearers. In Sameshima's corpus, which largely makes use of appropriation as a primary artistic strategy – he re-represents novelists (Rechy), artists (Sean), photographers (Bob Mizer and other beefcake photographers of the 1950s), and most recently musicians (Darby Crash of The Germs). It is, to be sure, an eclectic group of idols – each a pioneer in his own field for his time. The members of this motley group, though, are often at odds with one another. For example, Rechy often told interviewers that he considered leathersex practices an example of theater, while Darby Crash consciously countered the well-groomed and muscular models of the Athletic Model Guild with his own disheveled, fleshy and bruised body.

Two of Sameshima's projects, ones that are remarkable in that they aren't predicated upon the act of appropriation, *In Between Days (without you)*, 1997 and *Untitled (Griffith Park)*, 2007 offer an opportunity to triangulate a particular decoding and reading *Bodily Fluids*. These two series, each comprised of multiple photographs, depict sex after the fact. *In Between Days* was created by Sameshima in the wake of a breakup and documents the end result of fifteen consecutive visits to a Los Angeles bathhouse [fig. 4.10]. Some photos are suffused with red light, some washed out by

Sameshima's camera flash. Likewise a solitary pillow appears in different configurations; in the corner, against the wall, wet and flat on the bed surface, crumpled and folded like a body – sometimes in close proximity to the ubiquitous gay bathhouse white towel or near a pack of cigarettes on a side table. What kind of sex (masturbatory, coupled or group) took place in these rooms, *if* any at all? The sheets have been disturbed but are they mussed up enough? Is that Sameshima's towel, or one left behind by someone else?



Figure 4.10: Dean Sameshima, *In Between Days (without you)*, 1997. Photograph.

*Untitled (Griffith Park)*, an installation made ten years after *In Between Days* pictures an empty urban park which has historically been aligned with cruising and gay public sex [fig. 4.11]. John Rechy sets many of his novels in Griffith Park, describing in detail the best places to find partners to fuck and where exactly to take them. In locating these spaces Sameshima tellingly reads Rechy's novels as guidebooks. The thirty-six



photographs that make up Sameshima's installation are printed in black and white, and range in size. Most were taken in the evening or at night with nary a body in sight. In their installation, there is no consistent horizon line, just a collection of views – roughly descriptive of the hills and valleys of Griffith Park [fig. 4.12]. The placement of the photographs on the wall, then, becomes a way of relating geography, not as a coherent map, but as a collection of hidey-holes and vantage points.



Figure 4.11: Dean Sameshima, *Untitled (Griffith Park)*, 2007. Photograph.



Figure 4.12: Dean Sameshima, *Untitled (Griffith Park)*, 2007. Installation.

These installations, in particular, have been read as “ritual[s] of mourning,”<sup>215</sup> for personal and communal losses (boyfriends, public places to have sex). For Susette Min, Sameshima’s photographs are “a displaced affect for a longing of love that can be realized only through the denial of and desire for other kinds of ‘illicit’ attachments.”<sup>216</sup> These readings are certainly attentive to some of Sameshima’s own statements about his work.<sup>217</sup> Sentiments of loss and mourning are repeated in another review that describes Sameshima’s work as a “discourse” that “tactfully speaks of unresolved signs and the fragments of love.”<sup>218</sup> But perhaps Sameshima’s work could also be read in terms of

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<sup>215</sup> Ruben Gallo, “Dean Sameshima,” in *Cream 3* (London: Phaidon, 2003), 332.

<sup>216</sup> Susette Min, “Remains to Be Seen: Reading the Works of Dean Sameshima and Khanh Vo,” in *Loss*, eds. David L. Eng and David Kazanjian (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 2003), 236.

<sup>217</sup> Honigman.

<sup>218</sup> Catherine Taft, “A Lover’s Discourse...” [review] *Artforum.com*, Feb. 18, 2006. Web. Accessed June 6, 2012. The reception and interpretation of Felix Gonzales-Torres’ corpus of work, especially his billboards such as *Untitled* (1991), would provide an interesting comparison to Sameshima’s critical reception. *Untitled* (1991) shares some formal similarities with Sameshima’s *In Between Days (without you)* - both feature slept-in beds, and were made within the context of the loss of a loved one (although death, in Gonzalez-Torres’ case, and a break-up, in Sameshima’s, are markedly different). Most interesting to me, though, is how this autobiographical information limits the interpretation of such images. My question is really: is there a way to explore/embrace/honor the context of loss and mourning within these

potential as well as disappearance and brokenness. All it would take is a group of queers to congregate in Griffith Park to make it a sexual playground again. Maybe we're already there, hidden under the brush. Or another trick or two or three to open the door to Sameshima's room, initiating another round of productively ambivalent rebound sex. *Bodily Fluids* is shot through with these same possibilities; the image is ultimately an open-ended suggestion regarding sex, community and history. Sameshima's work also aims to identify the historical specificity of each viewer – to some, the views of Griffith Park seem innocuous nocturnal photographs, to others they resonate as places of contact. Sameshima's work, in other words, lives in history, placed in terms of a continuum of experience, rather than an isolated set of objects with unchanging meanings.

Berliners, for the opening of "Numbers", connected the dots on the exhibition posters distributed throughout the city by Sameshima's gallery. Interacting with the artist's work in a way proscribed by the image (yet denied by the context of the gallery in which Sameshima's paintings were exhibited) Berliners in the 21<sup>st</sup> century (un)intentionally built a vocabulary of contact in much the same way that the denizens of Griffith Park in the 1970s did. Over the course of the exhibition Sameshima received photo-texts from friends and acquaintances documenting that, indeed, people invested time in connecting the dots, resulting in dozens of drawings of men fellating themselves, giving blowjobs through glory holes and fisting each other. For a short while, in various spaces throughout Berlin, Sameshima's colorful appropriations visually manifested a part of 1970s U.S. leather communities, pointing to corporeal acts that no doubt were also taking place across the urban landscape of Berlin.

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artists' projects, while also insisting on the possibility of a politics of imagination and creation? For more on Gonzalez-Torres see Nancy Spector, *Felix Gonzalez-Torres* (New York: Guggenheim Museum, 1995).

END

While yellow is indeed the color of the dots and numbers in *Bodily Fluids* there is a second color, white. White, according to the hanky code used by Peres Projects means “beat my meat” if worn on the left and “I’ll do us both” if worn on the right. One of the connect-the-dots images in *Bodily Fluids* fits this hanky meaning as, when completed, it depicts masturbation – albeit without a second person to lend a hand. Yellow and white stripes indicates a preference for an “oriental” top (L) or bottom (R). This organization reverses the right/left alignment of the hanky code, which positions the wearer in active (L) and passive (R) roles. With the yellow and white striped hanky the wearer *projects these preferences onto the desired body*, here: Asian. For me, this points to the ways in which representations of race alongside desire rupture seemingly ordered (white) systems. To complete the circuits of such ethnically and racially specific desires, the code had to be reconstituted, even reversed.

In one interview Sameshima acknowledges and refocuses representations of his own race, sexuality and gender, insisting on their plurality rather than their singularity: “Yes I am Asian and gay and male, and my various bodies of work contain levels of the personal, but I don’t want it to be defined by one limited term.”<sup>219</sup> *Bodily Fluids* importantly contains multiple hanky code alignments, avoiding “one limited term.” Yellow doesn’t just indicate piss play here, but mutual masturbation and race fetish too. Taking into account the images that emerge when the two connect-the-dots drawings are completed, self-sucking and glory-hole blowjobs, we might add yet two more ways of fucking. That’s five sex acts condensed onto one flat surface. When the dots are left

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<sup>219</sup> Paul Flynn, “Print: Dean Sameshima,” *i-D Magazine*, no. 264 (2006): 30.

unconnected, as Sameshima has done, there is even more room to play. More space to, cribbing a phrase from a 2006 Sameshima photograph, “PICTURE YOURSELF HERE!” **[fig. 4.13].**



Figure 4.13: Dean Sameshima, *Picture Yourself Here*, 2006. Fuji-flex print, 30 x 40".

## Chapter 5: Stud and Super-Twink

Here are three descriptions of the same film:

*L.A. Plays Itself*, shot in 16mm, begins with tedious, aimless scenes of a man driving around the streets of Los Angeles, accompanied by a long, poorly recorded and almost totally incomprehensible soundtrack. The words that can be understood are spoken by a young man who has come to Los Angeles and has been warned to beware of the unkindness of strangers. A man cruising in the car (played by Halsted himself) picks the boy up and takes him home, where he physically beats him and subjects him to protracted sexual abuse. After this vision of sex as cruel abasement, however, the tone of the movie changes; the second half is shot in the woods and features two handsome young men who engage in several homosexual acts in a forest and under a waterfall.<sup>220</sup>

Halsted classic. Evolution from nature to industry and sexual revolution. A hiker finds a nude blonde man in a small stream and they make beautiful love together. Then comes a bulldozer and development. Now it's L.A. with its adult movies and sex for sale on the street. Fair. HIS version deleted S&M.<sup>221</sup>

Theme is how sexual behavior has deviated with the industrial revolution and the destruction/desecration of nature.<sup>222</sup>

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<sup>220</sup> Kenneth Turan and Stephen F. Zito, *Sinema: American Pornographic Films and the People Who Make Them* (New York: Praeger Publishers, 1974), 192-193. What Zito and Turan describe as “tedious” and “aimless” is only those things to someone who doesn’t recognize or isn’t invested in the “cruising” gaze. A lot is, in fact, going on – and the audience is invited to cruise the many bodies captured by Halsted’s lens, deciding for themselves which they would or wouldn’t attempt to pick up. If a viewer is not attuned to this, as it seems Turan and Zito are not, the early montages of the film just look like snippets of street life. Furthermore there is a fundamental misunderstanding of the S/M content as “sexual abuse.”

<sup>221</sup> *The Blue Guide to Adult Male Films & Stars* (Ogdensburg, NJ: FD Enterprises, Summer 1989), I-56. This guide also gives *L.A. Plays Itself* a rating of 88 (out of 100 points possible). The breakdown goes as follows: 22 for technique, 23 for the cast, 23 for the plot, and 20 for eroticism. These categories are further defined by this guide. “Technique: The quality of the sound, the picture, the set or background and/or the props, etc. Cast: The attractiveness of the actors, their appropriateness for the role and their performance. Plot: Reflects the believability of the story line and the flow of the action. Eroticism: The subjective judgement [sic] of the reviewer as to the general excitement of the material.”

<sup>222</sup> *Al’s Male Video Guide* (Midway Publications, 1986), 140. This entry is in reference to the VHS release of *L.A. Plays Itself*. Here is the full entry:

NO. 276 *L.A. Plays Itself* / YEAR: / RUN TIME: 73 min / MODE: Film / DIR: Fred Halsted / PROD: Fred Halsted / STUDIO: Video Co. of America / FILM QUALITY: Good Focus, Poor Sound, Fair Color, Good Action / STARS: Fred Halsted, Joseph Yale, Jim Frost, Rick Coates / AGES: 20-30 / BODY TYPES:

It would appear from these three accounts that three distinct, yet similar, films are being described. *L.A. Plays Itself* is comprised of two twenty-five minute acts.<sup>223</sup> It uses, in the words of its director Fred Halsted, “a simplistic structure to work against a detailed complexity.”<sup>224</sup> Shot in 16mm in 1969 and 1970, and finally released in 1972, one act focuses on the natural grandeur of the Malibu hills and details a sexual encounter between a hiker and nude blonde man playing in and around a stream. The other act features Fred Halsted cruising up and down Selma Avenue in Los Angeles, then whipping, beating and finally fisting Joey Yale, an actor and Fred Halsted’s long-time lover, in a two-tiered urban interior. In the first description, which comes from Kenneth Turan and Stephen Zito’s *Sinema*, the leather act comes before the nature act, whereas that order is reversed in the second description which comes from a 1989 pornographic video guide. More illegible is the third description from an earlier incarnation (1986) of a similar pornographic video guide. The brevity of this description elides a distinction

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Well built, Swimmer’s body, Macho, Hairless, Well Endowed, Cut / ETHNIC TYPES: Blonde, WASP, Swarthy / SCENERY: Field/Woods, Bedroom, Shower, Garage / ATTIRE: Clone, Leather, Mostly Nude / ACTION: Some Solo JO, Little Rubbing, Little Kissing, Much Sucking, Some Fucking, Little Spanking, Some S&M, Little Whipping, Bondage/Foot Service / MUSIC: Soft Rock / STORY LINE: Theme is how sexual behavior has deviated with the industrial revolution and the destruction/desecration of nature. / SYNOPSIS: 1) Two guys suck, fuck, fondle, kiss and JO in the forest. 2) Guy takes off clothes and crawls on hands and knees up stairs to a guy waiting at top. He licks shoes, gets kicked in the ass, whipped with rope and stepped on, whipped with belt, tied to bed and spanked, forced to suck then gagged, tied and put in closet. 3) Guy masturbates on bed. 4) Another film, “The Sex Garage Presents” in black and white. 5) Previews of “Alley Cats” and “American Cream.”

<sup>223</sup> I am using the term act as a way of describing the “macrostructure” of the almost-half-hour segments, as opposed to the “microstructure” of shots, aligning with David Bordwell’s use of the same term. David Bordwell, “The Hook: Scene Transitions in Classical Cinema,” davidbordwell.net. Jan. 2008. Web. Accessed June 6, 2012. Bordwell points out that this macrostructure comes from the physical limitations of reel size, and so the structure of Classical Cinema traditionally had three or four acts tracing the set-up of characters and their wants and desires, the things that block these desires, and the resolution (whether that’s in the character’s favor or not). This is only one way to read “act”; the word has a useful polysemy. Act also implies something about the process of behaving in front of a camera (acting), as well as the process of doing something – or in the case of *L.A. Plays Itself* sex act. Sexual play is also called action. I also want to assert that “act” here has a philosophical geneology as well – especially in its use by Judith Butler. Judith Butler, “Performative Acts and Gender Constitution: An Essay in Phenomenology and Feminist Theory,” *Theatre Journal* 40, no. 4 (Dec. 1988): 519-531.

<sup>224</sup> Stuart Byron, “L.A. Plays Itself,” *The Real Paper*, June 13, 1973: 17.



between leather and nature acts, making the film appear as a contiguous whole rather than a pair of seemingly unrelated acts. The discontinuity in description would seem to indicate that the film was edited differently for the two formats (16mm film and VHS, respectively) discussed by the reviewers – the film version orders the leather act first, while the VHS orders the nature act first. To further complicate things, the copy of the film residing in the Museum of Modern Art’s archives conforms to the order of the VHS, not to the order of the film Halsted initially produced.<sup>225</sup> To discuss *L.A. Plays Itself* is to enter into dialogue with an flexible format history. At times, and in concordance with the three descriptions above, it feels like *L.A. Plays Itself* is two films and not one, not only because each act is formally and sexually different from the other, but also because the different orderings of *L.A. Plays Itself* create different sets of meanings. Description serves as a point of entry for considering such multiplicity of meanings.

As for Halsted, he described *L.A. Plays Itself* as “a sadomasochistic, fistfucking faggot film.”<sup>226</sup>

Description has been and remains one of art history’s most fundamental tools, and in examining the descriptions of *L.A. Plays Itself* and the orderings they refer to, I seek to produce a kind of history through description. In other words, in describing the film myself, much more is intimated than just a sense of the object being described; my choice of words indexes a context. Halsted’s description of his film as a “sadomasochistic,

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<sup>225</sup> My research indicates that there are three known copies of *L.A. Plays Itself* in existence – one resides at MoMA, the other with Bijou Theater owner Steven Tushin, and the third with porn-mogul Larry Flynt. Tushin can’t seem to find his copy of the film, and Flynt’s archives were unavailable and not within the scope of my research.

<sup>226</sup> Paul Alcuin Siebenand, “The Beginnings of Gay Cinema in Los Angeles: The Industry and the Audience” (Dissertation, University of Southern California, 1975), 200-201.

fistfucking faggot film” is different from the video-guide that describes the same film as an “evolution from nature to industry and sexual revolution.” These two descriptions are not mutually exclusive. Halsted made his remarks to Paul Alcuin Siebenand in 1975, then a Ph.D. student writing a dissertation on 1960s and 1970s’ pornographic films made in Los Angeles. As such, Halsted’s response indicates that he saw his films as different from those made by his contemporaries, whom he knew Siebenand was also interviewing.<sup>227</sup> Descriptions generate particular affects - Halsted’s is akin to a pointy stick, and the video guide’s is more like a narrative story.

Because Halsted’s film was screened in multiple contexts and was ordered differently to fit those contexts, understanding the experience of viewing *L.A. Plays Itself* under divergent circumstances is necessary to understanding it as a cultural text. To access these experiences I want to make use of Joan Scott’s cautionary advice to not elide experience as uncontroversial historical evidence, as it “is not individuals who have experience, but subjects who are constituted through experience.”<sup>228</sup> Thus the experience of watching *L.A. Plays Itself* does not only belong to the viewer, but rather helps constitute a viewer as well. The same might be true of description as well. Certainly descriptions are embedded with and informed by the viewing experiences that then (knowingly or unknowingly) come to constitute the description. Tracking these descriptions helps to write histories of experiences intricately bound to the histories of the objects which help produce such experiences. If this seems a circuitous line of argumentation, that’s because it is. Indeed, these are mutually informing processes - experiencing a film, describing a film. By basing my chapter in the ways that *L.A. Plays*

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<sup>227</sup> One of the fabulous things about Siebenand’s dissertation is that he specifically asks each filmmaker about the other filmmakers and producers he’s interviewing.

<sup>228</sup> Scott (1992), 26.

*Itself* (as well as Fred Halsted and Joey Yale) has been multiply described and experienced by myself and others, I hope to also point to the ways in which a history might be constituted by the interrelated activities of viewing and writing. Description, then, when closely examined and engaged as a process of meaning-making just as important as the creation of the initial object, can be a place where we might build out history.

In this chapter I offer two descriptions of *L.A. Plays Itself* of my own, one that intercuts social and contextual meanings in much in the same manner that the film's leather act intercuts images of signage and men cruising in parks. The other is embedded in my own experience of first watching the film in the Museum of Modern Art screening room, replete with the anxieties and desires that both the film and the space of a museum inspire. I've wrestled with including this latter description; it feels indulgent or overly self-involved (does a reader *really* need to know what happened in that screening room) – but this is just as valid a way of “knowing” the film via a specifically placed experience, and in turn letting a reader in on how I came to (and continue to) understand *L.A. Plays Itself*. Ultimately, I hope to think through the ways that description is somewhat determined by experience, and how the experience of viewing is shaped by description. In doing so I also attend to the film's structure, exhibition and reception while calling attention to the many ways that description can be central to writing histories.

*L.A. Plays Itself* is an ideal object choice in this regard, as the film has lengthy holes in its exhibition history. Many who personally knew Fred Halsted are either dead or won't talk. Because of this fact, remaining descriptions of the film provide the most

readily available information. It was only through carefully tracing descriptions of *L.A. Plays Itself* that I came to understand it had variant orderings.

For the first three years of its exhibition life (1972-1974) the film was screened in the same order – first the leather act, then the nature act. This is documented in both Turan and Zito’s review that began this chapter and in Jonas Mekas’ 1972 review in *The Village Voice*. During this period the film was never screened in more than one location simultaneously, indicating that perhaps only one copy of the film existed. It wasn’t until the Cineprobe screening at the Museum of Modern Art in 1974 that descriptions of the film indicate a reordering of the two acts. At this point a new edit was made and a new copy of the film was circulated, one that would be screened and subsequently gifted by Halsted to the Museum of Modern Art. This important turning point in the film’s ordering underscores the need for a flexible understanding of the meanings of *L.A. Plays Itself*. The modern/industrial narrative put forth by the 1986 porn video guide – “evolution from nature to industry and sexual revolution” – doesn’t appear until after the resequencing of the film. Similarly one has to wonder if the “beautiful love” described in the video guide is experienced differently when it appeared after a scene of fistfucking? Such understandings of the particular valences of onscreen action may actually be the result of a specific ordering. By examining *L.A. Plays Itself* in tandem with Halsted’s extra-filmic, business and personal enterprises in the years between 1969 and 1975 it is my hope to arrive at a complicated reading that privileges both the early flexibility of this film alongside the (in)flexibility of the roles that Halsted and Yale seemed to inhabit during this time.

I should also note that while *L.A. Plays Itself* is my chief concern, the film was (and still is) often screened along with another Halsted film *Sex Garage*, which was also made in 1972. This pendant film only compounds the issue of ordering; because it was screened in various programs either before or after *L.A. Plays Itself*. Thus one could add another host of meanings to the structure of *L.A. Plays Itself*.<sup>229</sup> I have chosen not to integrate *Sex Garage* into my analysis here, and this may be a very real failing on my part. However, I think grappling with the internal order of *L.A. Plays Itself* provides an analytical scheme which could hopefully be extended or amended by another scholar interested in Halsted's output at some future date. I admit that considering *Sex Garage* would change my analysis, but because *Sex Garage* and *L.A. Plays Itself* were not always screened together, and ultimately because they were conceived as two unique films, I am confident that there is important work to be done in considering *L.A. Plays Itself* on its own terms.

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<sup>229</sup> I do not spend time in this chapter describing and discussing *Sex Garage* in the same way I do *L.A. Plays Itself*. *Sex Garage* is a black and white short that contains straight sex (between a man and women), gay sex (between two men), self sex (male masturbation) and man/machine sex. In the ultimate scene a man penetrates a motorcycle tailpipe. More thinking has to be done in regards to the ways to the ordering of *Sex Garage* and *L.A. Plays Itself*. For example, when screened first it may be a doorway for straight viewer – the first kinds of sex are straight sex – and this would go along with Halsted's repeated statements of wanting to appeal to a broader audience discussed elsewhere in this chapter. The ending act, fucking a tailpipe is indeed shocking, but may prepare an audience for the final fisting sequence of *L.A. Plays Itself*. Even today the films are screened together in the scant exhibition programs in which they appear. As with the two parts of *L.A. Plays Itself*, *Sex Garage* and *L.A. Plays Itself* were ordered differently before and after 1974. *Sex Garage* is, however, infamous on its own as Halsted and the 55<sup>th</sup> Street Playhouse were charged with obscenity because of its exhibition. Addison Verrill, "N.Y. Hits Abuse-Abasement Pic," *Variety*, April 19, 1972: 1, 22. This same incident is described by Turan and Zito: "The police shutdown of *L.A. Plays Itself* had an amusing aspect. The undercover police who made the arrest went into the theater, saw a few minutes of hardcore sex, and lodged a complaint against the film. What they saw, however, was another film by Halsted, a short called *Sex Garage*, which depicted a variety of unusual sexual activities, including a man making love to his motorcycle." Turan and Zito, 193. But *Sex Garage* and *L.A. Plays Itself* weren't always screened together. Take, for instance, the screenings held in the Fall of 1974 at The Mini, a coffeelounge/sex club on 7<sup>th</sup> Ave. in New York, which only screened *L.A. Plays Itself*. See listings in *New York Times*, Oct. 16, 1974: 37 and Nov. 5, 1974: 29.

In discussing a third film, *SexTool*, the film Halsted made during the period when *L.A. Plays Itself* was being reordered, Halsted identified “switching” as a major theme of *Sextool*.<sup>230</sup> Initially devised as a strategy for distribution, Halsted thought that switching between straight, gay and trans characters and sex scenes in *SexTool* would help him broaden his potential audience base. His intention was to bridge gay and straight audiences by providing a little something for any sexual vantage point... a kind of sexual pluralism.<sup>231</sup> I concentrate on Halsted’s terminology, because switching could also be descriptive of the process of reordering *L.A. Plays Itself*, as well as describe the sexual flexibility of moving from top to bottom or from bottom to top while fucking.<sup>232</sup> This last meaning was one which Halsted crowed about, in regards to his own stud-liness (something which I will explore more in depth later). He claimed that he could switch, or turn, others, “That key business is all just playing games. You can take any of them and turn them around. At least I can.”<sup>233</sup> Switching, then, was not only a characteristic of leather sexuality for Halsted – albeit one that was obfuscated by a strong mythology of tightly dyadic relationships – but also a way of thinking about reaching a broader audience. It may be pure coincidence that Halsted’s discussion of switching coincided with his move towards mainstreaming his pornographic film – but I don’t think so.

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<sup>230</sup> Siebenand, 194-195. The whole quote is: “*Sextool* is based on several different specific sex scenes. In the sex scenes I want complete diversity. I let my imagination run amok. That is why my star is Charmaine Lee Anderson. I go from her with lipstick and bubbles to some of the roughest sex scenes you will ever see. She is a transsexual and I cut from her to a Crisco greased-up bicep. And this switching is thematic of the film.”

<sup>231</sup> Konstantin Berlandt, “An S&M Film the Whole Family Can Enjoy,” *Village Voice*, June 2, 1975: backpage, 69-70.

<sup>232</sup> “*LA Plays Itself* pretty much appealed to one audience. It was more or less autobiographical, so I didn’t try to appeal to a broad audience... I am intending [*SexTool*] to be an encyclopedia of sex...” Siebenand (quoting Halsted), 194.

<sup>233</sup> Siebenand, 218-219. The brackets are Siebenand’s.

Before unpacking this idea of switching any further I want to set Halsted's film up with my first description. The following text in italics consist of my description of *what happens* in the film, highlighting the audiovisual material that makes up the film. This text is interrupted by my own readings of what these shots and groups of shots may mean, either in terms of my own interpretation or in terms of the film's exhibition and reception histories. These sections are not in italics.

### **ACT ONE: CRUISING, A FAKE TEXAN ACCENT, FISTING**

*The film begins with scenes of cruising [Fig. 5.1]. Here we are on Selma Avenue below the Out-Of-Town newsstand, and at the corner of Hollywood and Las Palmas, in Griffith Park and on Santa Monica Blvd. Non-diegetic Moog-synth and flute music (by Tonto's Expanding Headband) is interspersed with non-diegetic sound samples – motorcycles and voices chattering.<sup>234</sup> Fred Halsted, who plays himself, walks up and down the streets – his point of view, collapsed here with the camera's lens, includes glimpses of random men and their packages.<sup>235</sup> He gets in his car and begins to drive. The mode of transportation may have changed but the cruising gaze remains. The camera lingers on a billboard advertising David Cammel and Nicholas Roeg's 1968 film*

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<sup>234</sup> This chapter could just as easily be about use of music in Fred Halsted's movies. Here he utilizes the state-of-the art synthesizer sounds of Tonto's Expanding Head Band, an experimental electronic duo comprised of the musicians Robert Margouleff and Malcolm Cecil. The name of the group was eponymous with the the instrument they co-created, dubbed Tonto an acronym for "The Original New Timbral Orchestra." In *L.A. Plays Itself* Halsted also uses Western Classical and East Asian orchestral scores during the nature act. As I intimated in an earlier footnote, elsewhere in Halsted's oeuvre he pulls from new wave, punk and disco. These soundtrack choices not only mimicked the diegetic sounds that might have been filmed at Halsted-owned leather bar, Halsted's, where some of his filmic action is set, but opens up a space for multiple readings of lyrical content. For example, "Pumping (my heart)" by Patti Smith, which appears in *A Night at Halsted's* (1982), Smith righteously yells "My fists, start pumping," a couplet that could just as easily describe fisting as political protest.

<sup>235</sup> We know that Halsted "plays himself" from not only the end-credits but also from promotional materials given out to coincide with the premiere of *L.A. Plays Itself* at the 55<sup>th</sup> St. Playhouse in New York. While everyone else seems to have a typological role – Joey is the "Blonde pick-up in L.A." and Jim Frost is the "Motorcycle hiker," only Fred Halsted and the city of Los Angeles play themselves.

Performance. Mick Jagger, *Performance*'s lead star, appears twice on the billboard, as a long-haired rocker and as a greased-back businessman. The tagline is: "Underground Meets Underworld."



Figure 5.1: Screen-captures, *L.A. Plays Itself*.

The billboard for *Performance* in this early montage introduces the recurrent filmic tactic of intercutting shots of an urban environment overloaded with advertisements and other forms of visual stimuli, while also placing *L.A. Plays Itself* in the context of underground film. Indeed, it is within the language of underground film that Halsted's film was initially presented to audiences in New York, Los Angeles, San Francisco and Seattle by the film's publicist, Stuart Byron, who was also film critic for *The Village Voice* and *The Real Paper*. *L.A. Plays Itself* and *The Sex Garage* first opened in New York on April 11<sup>th</sup> 1972 at the 55<sup>th</sup> Street Playhouse – a venue known for experimental (and sometimes pornographic) films.<sup>236</sup> Following this screening, the films

<sup>236</sup> *The New York Times*, April 9, 1972: D15.



opened on June 28<sup>th</sup> 1972 at the Paris Theater in Los Angeles.<sup>237</sup> These official openings were often presaged by a limited number of screenings for critics and gay rights activists. The press package given out by Byron at press screenings contained no fewer than two dozen quotations from a pantheon of cultural figures such as Norman Mailer, Allen Ginsberg, Dennis Altman, Frank O'Hara, Leo Braudy, and Halsted himself. Byron was making a concerted effort to present *LA Plays Itself* and *The Sex Garage* in the context of poetry (Ginsberg, O'Hara), avant-garde fiction (Mailer), and Surrealist experimental film (Braudy on Renoir). This view of *L.A. Plays Itself* aligns with Halsted's own aims for the film:

On my first films [*L.A. Plays Itself* and *Sex Garage*] I screened them with big name critics. Up to that time porno was always considered something you made money off of, but something you were never proud of, something you did secretly. Well, I just barged into fucking New York and said this is a film, cinema, a work of art. It also happened to be gay, hard-core porno. A sadomasochistic, fistfucking faggot film, but that's not the point.<sup>238</sup>

Here I repeat the line I took from Halsted ("sadomasochistic, fistfucking faggot film") and place this quotation in its original context. Taken as a whole, Halsted's statement indicates that he wants his film to be understood in many ways (as cinema, film, a work of art, and porno). This positioning of the film (by both Byron and Halsted) paid off when Jonas Mekas reviewed the film for *The Village Voice* on April 20<sup>th</sup>, 1972. After complaining about the smoke-filled 55<sup>th</sup> Street Playhouse, Mekas lauds *L.A. Plays Itself* along with Rosa von Praunheim's *It is Not the Homosexual Who is Perverse but the Society in which He Lives* as the first works in an emergent genre balanced between film

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<sup>237</sup> "Independent Theater Guide," *The Los Angeles Times*, June 28, 1972: F14. The Paris was located at 8163 Santa Monica.

<sup>238</sup> Siebenand, 200-201.

art and pornography. To make this argument Mekas compares the films to Jack Smith's *Flaming Creatures*, Jean Genet's *Un Chant d'Amour*, Barbara Rubin's *Christmas on Earth*, and Kenneth Anger's *Scorpio Rising* – setting Halsted's film firmly within an already decade-old canon of experimental films, mostly made by homosexual or queer filmmakers during the previous decade.<sup>239</sup> Mekas, importantly, doesn't connect *L.A. Plays Itself* to other pornos, indicating, perhaps that there was a need to overcompensate in positioning Halsted's film as art. While Mekas makes clear his preference for Praunheim's film over Halsted's, he still claims that "There is something about the first cries, first loves, first journeys abroad, first almost everything – and they are inimitable and they are total and very very real and they sum up once and for all everything that there is on the subject."<sup>240</sup> Mekas gives Halsted's film credit as the first in an emergent genre and thus seminal ("they are inimitable and they are total... they sum up once and for all everything that there is on the subject"). Mekas wasn't the only one who saw *L.A. Plays Itself* as an intellectual pornographic film. Indeed, one 1972 review which appeared in the New York-based *Interview* made an impression on Halsted. Halsted says he "loved [the review]" while knocking the fact that "it gets all shitty and intellectual."<sup>241</sup> The film was also rated by *Interview* the worst of the worst of 1972 – a rating that Halsted embraced with ironic pride.

*L.A. Plays Itself's* opening in Los Angeles couldn't have been more different. Instead of being compared to the films of Anger, Smith, Rubin and Genet, some critics in Los Angeles saw the film and filmmaker's claim to art as mere "pretention."<sup>242</sup> One

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<sup>239</sup> Jonas Mekas, "Movie Journal," *The Village Voice*, April 20, 1972: 75.

<sup>240</sup> Mekas, 75.

<sup>241</sup> Siebenand, 201-202.

<sup>242</sup> "L.A. Plays Itself" [Review], *Variety*, N.d. Museum of Modern Art Film Archives, Folder: Fred Halsted.

reviewer ended his review by roundly dismissing Halsted's efforts, "Halsted seems to think that his film is both art and social commentary. Forget it; it isn't even good pornography."<sup>243</sup> Stuart Byron attributed these criticisms of *L.A. Plays Itself* to the fact that the film was done in a "butch" rather than "femme" aesthetic.<sup>244</sup> Byron may have been right, and this criticism also extended to cover Halsted's persona as well as his filmmaker. Fellow Angelino filmmaker Pat Rocco, known for short nude film loops and documentaries of gay parades, described Fred Halsted as:

A very unusual man, who has done many diverse things in filmmaking. I had a private screening of *L.A. Plays Itself* before it was released. It seemed a very disjointed film to me, and I was quite surprised at its success. I don't see what people like in this film, but then tastes differ. I liked the scene by the waterfall, but the rest seemed rather odd.<sup>245</sup>

Rocco posits his reaction as a difference in "taste" - that he preferred the nature act over the leather act places Rocco, perhaps, in the "femme" camp. But more importantly, Rocco seems to confirm Byron's hypothesis that those in Los Angeles could not make sense of Halsted's film or even Halsted himself. Rocco describes the film as "disjointed" and "rather odd," and Halsted as "very unusual."

Already then, a dynamic was set up in the film's reception – most likely a symptom of larger cultural conversations happening long before Halsted's film was screened – that critics in Los Angeles lukewarmly accepted the film as pornography,

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<sup>243</sup> Gold, "L.A. Plays Itself," *Variety*, April 12, 1972.

<sup>244</sup> Stuart Byron, "Brothers Under the Skinlick," *Village Voice*, July 20, 1972b: 57.

<sup>245</sup> Siebenand, 75. The scene Rocco makes reference to, and that I discuss later in this chapter looks as though it was ripped straight from a Rocco movie. Many of Rocco's films featured young, slim hairless men in natural settings – posing and occasionally kissing, rarely fucking.

while critics in New York accepted it as art.<sup>246</sup> Halsted was more partial to the latter interpretation. In considering an opening city for his next feature, *SexTool* Halsted remarked that he wanted to open in New York rather than Los Angeles because “L.A. is a fucking cowtown,” as evidenced by the fact that he had “never been a hit in L.A.”<sup>247</sup>

*We then cut to a shot of an exterior of a porn theater. A voice-over begins to read a prose passage, seemingly disconnected from the action of the film and difficult to make out. The images roll by fast: a sidewalk filled with people, a hitchhiker, more porno advertisements and then Fred Halsted’s voice comes in, “What you reading?” A close-up of the blonde pickup’s face (Joey Yale) is followed by extreme close-ups of his blonde mop and hairless mouth and chin. We never see voice and image synched up and so the soundtrack remains disconnected from the action – commenting upon it but never diegetic. The voiceover which was earlier reading the prose text answers in a thick Texas drawl that he’s reading from something he found on a Greyhound Bus on his way from Houston, Texas.<sup>248</sup> We see Yale at the bottom of a set of stairs, undoing his fly and taking*

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<sup>246</sup> Joseph Bean recounts the opening of *L.A. Plays Itself* and confirms its success based on a very specific set of criteria – that is arousal: “*LA Plays Itself*. That’s another story. I was being in a new wave of sex flicks at the time that Fred Halsted and Joey Yale began making that whole series of movies, and I always went to the “grand openings.” Of course, some of their grand openings had trouble happening for various reasons, but *LA Plays Itself* and *Sex Garage* opened together and I saw them in their opening at a little theater on a northerly curve of Sunset Boulevard where such things happened back then, I think I have this sorted out correctly in memory. The openings tended to be at that little theater, including Fred’s and I’m pretty sure the *Sex Garage* double bill was there... Anyway, it seemed pretty unremarkable to me, frankly. I was doing Joey at a sex club regularly, watching Fred do scenes at the same club, and pretty much untouched by the content in any but the intended way (that is, arousal).” Joseph Bean, e-mail message to author. Sept. 12, 2009.

<sup>247</sup> Siebenand, 200, 202.

<sup>248</sup> It is rumored that Joey Yale’s part here was played by three different actors: one for the voice, one for the body and sex scenes, and one for the fisting scene. “There were three people involved and not two in the last sequence of *LA*.” Siebenand, 54. For other directors the veracity of the actors actually fisting didn’t matter either. To Bob Mizer, founder of the Athletic Model Guild a magazine and mail-order catalogue that trafficked in posing-strap and cheesecake images of naked and near-naked youths, “The people interested in fistfucking don’t even care about the faces of the people involved.” Siebenand, 53. Regardless, Yale was not Texan, but rather from Indiana.

*off his shirt and then his pants. The conversation continues audibly but visually the film thrusts the viewer back onto the streets with a short montage of a Kentucky Fried chicken billboard, graffiti reading "Gay Power," street traffic, industrial waste, a billboard for Skippy peanut butter, and more shots of street hustlers. Meanwhile in the voice-over Fred Halsted is telling Yale's character to be careful of the guys on the street. "They have dirty pants," Halsted says. The blonde pickup replies with, "Lots of people like dirty pants." Halsted agrees but warns his charge that he's got to keep his wits about him, and that he has to watch out for such people.*

Halsted himself was a vocal proponent of gay rights. He wrote of "The love of men for men," as "the oldest continuing culture," and that for him "the issue [was] not gay pride or gay equality but rather the obvious fact of GAY SUPERIORITY!"<sup>249</sup>

*The action cuts back to an interior where we see a man wearing black boots climbing a set of stairs, and the music now has a discernable beat. Soon, Yale is crawling up the stairs naked while Halsted (the man wearing the black boots) whips him from above with his belt. While being whipped the blonde pickup begins to lick Halsted's boot. Newsclippings of articles about the Tate-LaBianca murders are intercut with the action, the most prominent of these headlines reading "New Weird Cult."*

By the time that *L.A. Plays Itself* and *The Sex Garage* were first screened, the Tate and LaBianca murders were almost three years past. The clippings reveal something about the timeline of the making of *L.A. Plays Itself*. Conceived of in 1969, most of the

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<sup>249</sup> Fred Halsted, "Editorial," *Package* 1, no. 1 (July 1976b): 3. Halsted also believed that with the onset of birth control heterosexuals were becoming functioning homosexuals, due to their ability to engage in purely recreational sex. Siebenand, 226.

footage was shot in that year and in 1970 – with editing taking place over the next year and a half.<sup>250</sup> By the time Halsted first screened the film in Los Angeles he knew that these intercut headlines were viewed as problematic by some since he had already caught some flak for their inclusion:

At the gay lib screenings last week, some S&M people also complained about the intercuts to newspaper headlines. I say simply that these are thoughts that might go through my head during the sexual act and nothing else. It's no more valid to see that scene as suggesting that violence in bed leads to violence outside of it than it is to see it suggesting the opposite – that Theodore Reik and others are correct in suggesting that those who are brave enough to relieve their aggression in bed are less likely to do something like murder Sharon Tate.<sup>251</sup>

*Once more the action shifts to the street, as the camera and we, by extension, cruise by newsstands and watch a bulldozer in the cityscape demolishing a building. The interruption is only momentary, as we are back inside where Halsted is now kicking his blonde pickup with his boot. We see Yale from the back, and a white handprint outlined in a wash of red is clearly visible on his backside, evidence of having been recently and smartly slapped. Halsted kicks him into a bedroom area with a dirty mattress on the floor. Angled low to the ground we can also spot some rope, drugs and a bottle (of beer? of lube?) before the action moves outside again. Fast cuts reveal details of bugs, comic books, a leather jacket with a metal pin of an upraised fist, a black and white illustration of masculine eyes, and Halsted in the driver's seat.*

Throughout this half of *L.A. Plays Itself* are small montages sequences which I have not remarked upon, but they are iterations, in miniature, of the larger themes of

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<sup>250</sup> Fred Halsted, "Personal Training," *Package* 1, no. 4 (1976c): 16.

<sup>251</sup> Stuart Byron, "A Commonplace Press Handout on 'L.A. Plays Itself' and 'The Sex Garage'," independently produced and published, 1972a: 6.

Halsted's film.<sup>252</sup> In the particular instance described in the previous paragraph, the disparate images – bugs, comics, a metal pin of an upraised fist, an illustration and Halsted himself – condenses, and expands, a sense of time and space (we're indoors/outdoors, between drawing and film, organic and synthetic life), while also foreshadowing events to come. The footage of bugs will be central to the second act of *LA Plays Itself*, and so this moment represents the introduction of a leitmotif – one that Halsted strategically used to convince Yale to acquiesce to being in the film. The comic book imagery works as a visual rhyme to the schlocky reading material described on the voiceover soundtrack – something found on a Greyhound bus. Connected to the earlier graffiti of “Gay Power,” the raised fist of the metal pin comes from a specific iconography tied to emergent gay liberation efforts – and is an image that would later get co-opted by The Catacombs, an infamous fisting club in San Francisco. A brooding and dark illustration (Graphite? Ink?) precedes the image of Halsted himself and so directs the viewer to connect Halsted's visage with the masculine and mysterious drawing. While Halsted's subjective camera is cruising down the streets, we also look at Halsted looking. This short montage of images at once breaks the viewer out of a passive

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<sup>252</sup> There is a long history of examining the editing tactic of montage. While Lev Kuleshev is not the progenitor of montage, it is certainly his experiment of intercutting a close-up of a man's face with a child's coffin, a bowl of soup and a pretty woman which demonstrates the power of montage to make visual meanings. The audience in Kuleshev's experiment carried the different valences of each image over to the man's relatively unaffected facial expression. By “formulating an artificial time and space or guiding a viewer's attention from one narrative point to another,” Soviet filmmakers such as Kuleshev and Pudovkin used montage towards “rhythmic and narrative ends.” David Bordwell, “The Idea of Montage in Soviet Art and Film,” *Cinema Journal* 11, no. 2 (Spring 1972): 9, 10. But I think Maya Deren's conception of montage is more appropriate here, as she delimits “horizontal” and “vertical” forms of montage. Her comments which were made within the context of a roundtable discussion with Parker Tyler, Arthur Miller, Dylan Thomas, and moderated by Willard Maas, are of particular interest to me in that they signal a review of Soviet conceptions of montage. To Deren, “horizontal” montage suggests merely a narrative action, while “vertical” montage – even though “the incidents themselves might be quite disparate” – is the territory of dreams and poetry. Such “vertical” montages are held together by an emotional resonance. This is how I think montage operates in Halsted's film, as his film is consciously pitched as contributing to the culture of underground cinema which valued, even if not in Deren's exact terms, an alternative form of montage. Willard Maas, “Poetry and The Film: A Symposium,” *Film Culture*, no. 29 (1963): 55-63.

experience by providing a space for contemplating the broader connections and motifs being built out through Halsted's editing. At best, these montages function impressionistically, giving only an indirect sense of what is being referred to – unless, of course, the viewer is well informed in the heterogeneous subjects of entomology, comics, gay politics and art. These were Halsted's own areas of expertise.

*Dialogue from earlier in the film is repeated as the film cuts from Halsted and Yale's bodies writhing in mid-level darkness to comic books and back again. Halsted has a rope around the Texan's neck, and around his feet and arms. Yale is hog-tied. Halsted puts his boot on his trick's upraised ass. Yale's body lies atop newspapers strewn about the floor.*

To be clear, the sex in this act is not represented as an equal and loving exchange of power; there is struggle and uncomfortable squirming on the part of the blonde pick-up. These meanings are largely constructed by Halsted's editing, both visual and sonic. The soundtrack serves as an indicator of mood in this act and throughout *L.A. Plays Itself*. Here, the beats are hard and arrhythmic, interspersed with motorcycle muffler sounds replayed at alternate speeds. The effect is one of speed, uncertainty, and imbalance.

*We cut to the outside world. In an urban landscape Halsted is driving in his red El Camino, with a motorcyclist in tow. We then view more cruising shots in Griffith Park intercut with a sequence of images of a dog, tongue-out and slobbering.*

The intimation seems to be clear – dumb animal desire. Men are dogs (slobber).



*There is milling and walking outside of park restrooms. The voice-over between the blonde pickup and Halsted continues with the young Texan complaining that he only has two dollars. Halsted replies with “you got some attributes” at which points he offers to show the young man “the ropes.” Of course we have already seen Halsted showing this young man a bit of rope. Back in the two-story flat, the Texan writhes onscreen, Halsted whips and beats him. The young pickup is then tied to the bed and made to perform oral sex on Halsted. This is intercut with images of rusty nails and spurs – bits of iconography from the Old West. Suddenly the film cuts to an extreme close-up of Fred Halsted’s face, breaking the fourth wall and staring directly into the camera. This is the only moment of direct address in the film and Halsted holds his gaze (alongside the soundtrack of sustained cymbals) for a few seconds.*

It is only seconds, but it may feel longer, as the viewer is repositioned for the first time as the object, not the embodiment, of Halsted’s cruising gaze. The intensity of this shot is unmatched – it is not enough that Halsted is vigorously topping Yale; in this shot he is topping a viewer as well.

*Headlines strewn on the floor describe a “New Weird Cult,” interspersed with shots of pinned and mounted bugs.*

What is the relationship between a collection and a cult? Both are defined by an organizing presence – the collector, the cult leader – who has authoritarian control. Collecting, pinning and labeling bugs is an appropriate method of scientific inquiry, a way of learning how to identify species and genus, to name and control. Bug collecting is also a didactic tool, a way of sharing and disseminating knowledge. But a cult is

something socially stigmatized by most, and a cult leader is often viewed as the pathologized other who pushes his/her adherents beyond the bounds of acceptable cultural behavior. The cult leader's followers are often positioned as mindless dupes or vulnerable prey – as they were in the Tate/LaBianca murders. Is an equivalence being made – collecting bugs is like collecting humans?

*Fred Halsted in harsh bright light – daylight is finally coming into the apartment – lubes up his hands and body with oil and begins to masturbate. Images of comic books and Kentucky Fried Chicken repeat. Multiple times the camera zooms in and out quickly on a sign that reads (and is in the form of) “Lips.”*

The sign is the concrete poetry of consumerism. It imitates oral sex through the filmic technique of zooming.

*While the music builds, the camera cuts with ever increasing quickness (thus approximating a climax) between the image of Fred Halsted masturbating and these images: a patch of a fist, pins, needles and clothespins, wax dripping on wood and hardening, cruising in a park, a dog slobbering, a drum circle, a biker. The camera directly frames the entirety of Halsted's ejaculation before finally cutting back to Yale, still tied up on the bed.*

Here *L.A. Plays Itself* archly conforms to what Richard Dyer calls, “The basis of gay porn film,” which “is a narrative sexuality, a construction of male sexuality as the desire to achieve the goal of a visual climax.”<sup>253</sup> But, unlike other gay pornographic

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<sup>253</sup> Richard Dyer, “Male Gay Porn: Coming to Terms,” *Jump Cut*, no. 30 (March 1985): 27-29.

films, sexual climax is not the goal of Halsted's film, although the climax comes late into this act of the film, it is the act of fisting and not ejaculation which is situated as the narrative moment of climax. This underscores a point Halsted makes later in his interview with Paul Alcuin Siebenand:

I am interested in the subtle aspects of sex. The mind-fucking aspects of sex. I like to make sex films because it gives me an opportunity to state my views, a minority viewpoint, a personal viewpoint. That is the only reason I make these films. I don't do it for money. Nobody else makes gay films the way I do. I have certain ideas about sexuality. I don't particularly view sex as fun. To me sex is not fun. To me sex is not enjoyable. To me sex is an emotional release. I am just speaking for me. Some people like it, some don't. Mine is personal cinema. I don't fuck to get my rocks off. In the best scenes I have ever had, I haven't come. I am not interested in coming. I got out of that years ago. I am interested in getting my head off, my emotions off - - and if I get my dick off, my rocks off, it really doesn't matter that much to me, that is very down on the scale. I am interested in emotional satisfaction and intellectual satisfaction - - mine.<sup>254</sup>

*Halsted then begins to rub his own semen on his fist and forearm. A shot of a sign reading "Flap" zooms in and out, and yet again we see the headline "New Weird Cult." Halsted moves to the bed and begins to play with the blonde pick-up's ass, before he puts first his fingers and then his fist into it. His hog-tied trick struggles against the entering fist, and we see Halsted's arm elbow deep as the music grows louder and harder.*

The fisting sequence lasts a minute or so. Shot in extreme close-up, the sex act is strangely abstracted. It is difficult to tell what is forearm, ass and thigh. In its first public exhibition the final fisting scene apparently "elicit[ed] audience gasps because of its anatomical difficulty."<sup>255</sup> While there are shots in which Halsted's fist is undeniably

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<sup>254</sup> Siebenand, 205-206.

<sup>255</sup> Verrill, 1, 22.

inside of the blonde pick-up's ass, others are not quite so clear. Regardless, there is no footage of the hand in the process of being inserted into the ass – the hand is outside, and then it is inside. This is an elision of real time and reel time, as the act of fisting itself takes a significant amount of time to build up to. The rectum has to be stretched out to accommodate a fist.

*The action of fisting is capped with a shot of a sign of a hand holding a football helmet aloft.*

#### **ACT TWO: BUGS, OVERLAY, STRIPMINE**

*A sign reads “Population 2.5 million” [fig. 5.2]. Long establishing shots of the mist and mountains of the Malibu hills, alongside plunky Japanese music provides space and time for denouement from the previous act. Minutes pass by as the camera focuses on the micro and macro landscape. Bugs and flowers, mountains and a hiker wandering through the landscape seem to be the sole focus of the next ten minutes of L.A. Plays Itself.*



Figure 5.2: Screen-captures, *L.A. Plays Itself*.

Fred Halsted often claimed that *L.A. Plays Itself* was about bugs.<sup>256</sup> For Yale, this was the ruse under which Halsted seduced him into participating in the film's making, as he elaborated in a 1981 interview with *Skin* entitled "Halsted and Yale: Who's on Top?":

**JOEY:** Our films always take longer than anybody else in the industry to produce. But when Fred first told me about this film, he told me it was a film about nature, wildlife, and bugs. He did not tell me it was a sex film, when he first approached me with the idea of being in it—

**FRED:** —he was so in love with me at that point I could do anything with him—

**JOEY:** —so he basically told me a bunch o' lies—

**FRED:** —there *are* bugs in it!

**JOEY:** I know, there *are* bugs, and it's all full of nature in the film.<sup>257</sup>

<sup>256</sup> "I needed a young boy, and it was about bugs and stuff." Fred Halsted, "Fred Halsted," *Drummer* 1, no. 4 (Jan./Feb. 1976a): 48.

<sup>257</sup> Jeremy Hughes, "Halsted & Yale – Who's On Top?" *Skin* 3, no. 1 (1981): 8.

This act of the film feels full of nature because of the plodding introductory shots. Although they are dead, pinned and labeled, it is worth remembering that bugs also appear in the first act of the film. The changing condition of the bugs, from dead to living, is remarkable. If, in fact, the film is about bugs, then the narrative might be one of resurrection. What is remarkable about Halsted's little-white-lying here is that at no point in time was Joey filmed outside in nature, with bugs. One has to wonder what kind of experience Yale had while filming, as it was certainly counter to what he was told – this disconnect might have been what kept Yale away in the years Halsted spent editing the film.

*Meanwhile a voiceover explains that the “city is where it’s happenin’.” But this same voice also bemoans that because it has “filled up with so many New Yorkers” that they’re “taking over everything.” Another voice asks, in an unrelated string of dialogue “What’s wrong with sniffing flowers?” The answer from Halsted: “At least I ball humans!”*

Of these voices, one is discernable again as Fred Halsted's, but the other doesn't have the distinctiveness of the Texan-drawl belonging to Yale's character. Although Fred Halsted does not appear in this act of the film, his voice ties the two acts together. When he exclaims that he “ball[s] humans,” he is only confirming what we already know because we've witnessed it. Not only do we know that he balls humans but that he also handballs – or fists – them.

*Meanwhile the male hiker happens upon a naked blonde boy playing by a small body of water. At this point the score shifts from Japanese samisen music to a European*

*orchestral score as the two men begin talking to each other. The blonde offers the hiker a blowjob. The hiker unbuckles his belt as the blonde, described by the press release as “Elf in Stream,” begins to suck his dick. Their interaction is slow and sweet. The two men touch each other’s bodies and hold each other’s hands as they exchange blowjobs. The music changes back to the Japanese soundtrack.*

After the leathersex in the first act of the film, the action here seems at once genuinely sweet and also saccharine and naïve. Although Halsted began making this film in the late 60s, the second act would have visually echoed Wakefield Poole’s seminal film *Boys in the Sand* (1971) for contemporary viewers, in its use of idyllic natural settings and slow sex. Both of these traits are not exclusive to Poole, having existed for some time in short film loops distributed by mail-order to viewers’ homes, but *Boys in the Sand* was an early mainstream gay pornographic success. Halsted’s film often played in the same venues in which Poole’s films were screened. Halsted called *Boys in the Sand* “a good suck-fuck film” as opposed to his “somasochistic, fistfucking faggot film.”<sup>258</sup> Yet it is precisely this, a “good suck-fuck film” that is being offered up to viewers of the second act.

*The blowjob stops and the two men romp and play in the water, in what appears to be a post-coital moment despite the absence of an orgasm.*

Halsted said that time was meant to be ambiguous in the film, taking place in “a day, a month, a year.”<sup>259</sup> This is evidenced by the dialogue in *L.A. Plays Itself* which is

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<sup>258</sup> Siebenand, 203.

<sup>259</sup> Byron (1972a), 57.

denaturalized as a linear progression of thoughts spoken between two people. The action of the hiker and the elf seems to happen in an ambiguous time-frame. Sexual play is interspersed with non-sexual play, and climax (here: ejaculation) is put off until after the characters have had a swim. Even after ejaculation they continue to fuck, perhaps intimating repeated encounters.

*They are in a cave with a waterfall, playing. Footage of frogs coupling is intercut into the sequence of light-hearted fun. This is immediately followed by extreme close-ups of bodily contact. These close-ups, like the fisting sequence that occurred fifteen minutes previous are highly abstracted and body parts can only be guessed at. As the camera shows wider shots the activity becomes clear – the hiker is fucking the elf. They congress in many positions, each carefully and aesthetically considered, and the action is always slow and sensual – never fast or rough.*

Watching the film in this ordering makes me uneasy, as at any moment I expect the action to break out into leathersex.

*Shots of butterflies and nature are intercut as the Western orchestral music swells. The camera alights on the hiker's tattoo which reads "U.S.N. Never Again!" identifying him as a member of the Navy. The two men switch positions as images of nature are overlayed. Nature becomes a patterned veil – obscuring and by consequence making the unobstructed image all-the-more precious. The hiker then ejaculates in extreme close-up.*



When considering Mekas' review of *L.A. Plays Itself*, it is this segment which seems to illustrate his claim that Halsted borrows Kenneth Anger's formal tactic of overlaying images, something which Anger does towards the end his film, *Scorpio Rising*. Three-dimensional space is collapsed into patternized form, discrete images are not easily discernable.

These overlain filmic images most consciously mirror the paintings that Halsted created after he completed *L.A. Plays Itself*. Halsted was not only a gardener, pornographic film director, business owner, writer, actor but also an artist. It was his "artistic leanings" that made him "a man of mystery" to the writer of Halsted's obituary.<sup>260</sup> Halsted had at least one show in 1977 at the Paideia Gallery on La Cienega in Los Angeles.<sup>261</sup> The show was reviewed in *The Los Angeles Times*, and it seems that the critic lets the knowledge of Halsted's status as pornographic film director inform (penetrate?) his analysis, stating, "The artist forces the spectator to slowly enter into the secret places his uneven paintings provide."<sup>262</sup> The paintings themselves consist of amorphous shapes of muddy colors laid atop one another. Their abstract patterning is familiar as a kind of gloopy analogue to the overlaying in the nature act of *L.A. Plays Itself*. While the imagery is non-representational, the title of the 1977 show, *Secret Places*, provides a key to understanding – as "secret places" not only implies at once geography, body and psychology. The abstraction can appear at turns specifically cave-like and colonic, subsets of the above categories.

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<sup>260</sup> Harold Fairbanks, "Fred Halsted," Obituary, *The News*, June 9, 1989: 19.

<sup>261</sup> Fairbanks, 19.

<sup>262</sup> H.J.S., [untitled review], *Los Angeles Times*, Jun 10, 1977: H5.

*Quickly the music changes to a deep rumbling and images of lizards, spiders and bulldozers are interspersed with the sex. Sequences of bulldozing, detailing large mechanical plows with hard-hatted riders, are overlain, like the images of nature and sex before. When shots of the natural world enter into overlay they are often now upside-down (or the bodies are upside-down). The images of sex compress and collage the actions of oral and anal sex. Bulldozing is overlaid with repeated shot, counter-shots of sexual activity and dirt.*

This sequence of overlays lasts a few minutes and builds to a kind of release-point (following the climax of ejaculation minutes before). During this sequence Halsted's shots become more and more unreadable. Halsted's interest in mind-fucking is on display here, and it further complicates the body-fucking we've just seen.

*Finally, the camera slowly zooms out from an American flag standing on the highest mesa of a strip mine teeming with bulldozers, construction workers and cars which are queued up and driving offscreen.*

#### **"FOR THE CITY OR AGAINST IT?"**

I want to briefly concentrate on a specific set of images from *L.A. Plays Itself*, the first and last images in the two acts: a car in front of a body shop, a sign of a hand holding a football helmet aloft, the Los Angeles city limit sign, and a flagpole standing atop a stripmine. These four images, depending on the ordering of the film, are responsible for establishing and transitioning meaning. Much of the heavylifting in terms of making meaning *between* the two acts, and the overall narrative thrust of *L.A. Plays Itself* is located in the beginnings and endings of the two acts.

As described above, the initial shot in the original sequencing of *L.A. Plays Itself* is of a Chevy El Camino in front of a body shop. The El Camino has the parts and horsepower of a car, and also has the utility of a pickup; it is neither one nor the other, but both. This could be a kind of description of *L.A. Plays Itself*; the film is not about nature *or* leather, but *both*. In this shot Fred Halsted walks in from the right of the frame and gets into this red El Camino and drives off left, identifying not only the vantage point from which the upcoming moving images are shot but also an alternative legibility of the film (going from right to left, instead of left to right – the conventional direction of reading in the United States).

The paired images of an arm holding a football helmet aloft on a sign and the Los Angeles City limits sign connect the two acts. The first conveys victory, an action typically seen at the end of a football game or after a touchdown. This image comes right on the heels of the fisting sequence, and so suggests fisting as an athletic triumph. Fisting is difficult and hard on the body. For Halsted, who cultivated a specific image of masculinity, this association of athleticism would have been powerful. It should also be remarked that the hand grasping the grill of the football helmet is in the form of a fist, echoing the images on the pins and patches that appear elsewhere in *L.A. Plays Itself*. This is imagery often represented in the colors of fisting clubs and organizations. The form of the clenched fist holding a football helmet, upraised in revolt, or prepped for fisting look similar, but the meanings are quite different. In reiterating this image multiple times (in sexual activity, in graffiti, in the pin, in signage) Halsted is drawing iconographic links among sexual practice, masculinity, consumerism and revolution. The meaning thus constructed is that fisting is both revolutionary, and perhaps already ripe for commodification.

The Los Angeles city limit sign, a green sign announcing the population of the city, communicates a quick spatial move from city interior to its border – we are now leaving Los Angeles. It also linguistically puns on the bodily “limits” stretched by the act of fisting as seen in the previous sequence. The final shot in the second act is of a slow zoom out from a flag atop a tall flagpole overlooking a stripmine. A line of cars snakes from the middle of the frame to the bottom left and then out of the frame. Workers are leaving their place of work, and the film is over. The end of a workday is also the end of the film. By implication, perhaps, all activities contained in the film (cruising, fisting, fucking, driving) will be repeated tomorrow. Through this sequence, Halsted draws attention to the work of sexuality as much as he draws attention to the destruction of nature and the mining of natural resources. Such consumption of natural resources is identified (critically) as a particularly American phenomenon – the flag on the flagpole suggests the entire imagined community of nation, a kind of rhetorical zoom out from the geographic site of Los Angeles to the United States as a whole. It also serves as a prophesy. You, like the cars and trucks filing out of the mine will soon file out of the theater and go home.

It is telling that Halsted ends his film here, as he was well aware of the implications of urban encroachment, which poses as another destructive force driven by Capitalism:

Even in the Forties, when I was a kid, Southern California, to me, was still a paradise, a paradise that's now been largely lost. Cesar Chavez is one of my heroes, but I would argue that even for a migrant worker - - even for the Okies and Chicanos and blacks - - L.A. was a better place then than now. The air was pure, you were five minutes from unspoiled mountains and beachfronts. Every cent of profit from this film [*L.A. Plays Itself*] is going to the Theodore Payne Foundation, which hopes to buy up Decker Canyon, where the second half of the

film was largely shot. If not, it's going to be sold to some subdivider who'll put up another shopping center.<sup>263</sup>

Evident here is not only Halsted's disdain for commercial interests replacing an "unspoiled" and "pure" paradise, but also his cognizance of social justice movements as he references Cesar Chavez and vows to support the preservation of nature through a gesture of philanthropy.<sup>264</sup> Halsted shows a penchant for nostalgic memory and naïve utopianism, especially in regards to his assertion that things were better for Chicanos and black people during his childhood: how exactly would he know this? His politics, rendered here in an anti-consumerist and anti-development are nonetheless important, and at seeming odds with his own positioning of himself as an entrepreneur. Left with the image of the flag waving over the strip mine, Halsted communicates a cynical take on the contemporary American landscape to the viewer of *L.A. Plays Itself*.

When the screening order of the two acts *L.A. Plays Itself* is reversed, the images propose other meanings. For example, when reordered, the opening shot of the film would be the green Los Angeles city limits sign. The sign confirms that the city is indeed an important character as is also confirmed in the end-credits in which Los Angeles is credited as being played by "itself." Much more than the car outside an autobody shop, which could be in any urban locale, the Los Angeles city limits places a viewer in relation to a specific urban context. The natural scenes that follow are then placed adjacent or inside of Los Angeles. Thus an image of Los Angeles as a sprawling and speedy West coast metropolis is immediately complicated by slow and ponderous sequences of nature. In this reading, the "natural" sex that takes place outside is not rural

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<sup>263</sup> Byron "A commonplace..." (1972a), 7. Quoting Fred Halsted.

<sup>264</sup> No records exist as to whether or not the profits actually did go to the Theodore Payne Foundation.

sex, but urban sex, a public sex. It is reflective of one of the many modes of sexual address “open” to gay men at the time, anonymous sex in an urban park. In such a space there are many “secret places” to at once hide and be seen, but only in part.

The shot of the American flag and the strip mine at the end of this act would then serve to connect the nature act to the leather act. Instead of ending with the indictment that urban encroachment is ruining the natural utopia of Decker Canyon, this sequencing of the film indicates that urban encroachment partly *facilitates* the expansion of cruising grounds and new forms of fucking: parks, docks, auto-body shops, as well as fisting. Indeed, Michel Foucault assented on this point of sexual *development* called fisting “our century's only brand-new contribution to the sexual armamentarium.”<sup>265</sup> In this light, the actions of the bulldozers are a prelude to the plowing that Yale is going to receive.

There is the also the formal connection of the cars going from right to left out of frame, which is echoed in the establishing shot of the second act as Fred Halsted gets into his El Camino and drives away. Unlike the first ordering of the film in which driving away also signalled the end of the film, here the drive away indicates that, just as the strip-miners are, Fred Halsted is also getting off of work and is about to begin enjoying his leisure time.

This second act finishes with the image of the arm holding the football helmet, rhyming with the previous shots of deep and vigorous fisting. The last thing an audience sees is an everyday/commercial image which has been imbued with new sexual content through the previous act of editing. The film ends by teaching an audience to read radical

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<sup>265</sup> David Halperin, *Saint Foucault* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1995), 92.

sexual meaning into everyday (otherwise) non-sexual signs. Halsted perverts Americana itself, football being a distinctly American sport in origin. Instead of filing out of the theater like cars, an audience leaves prepped to read out sexual double-entendre.

Even in the initial ordering Halsted saw his film as at once schematic and ambivalent, and this is only compounded when considering both sequencings of *L.A. Plays Itself*, “Everything in the film has been done deliberately. One the one hand schematic, on the other ambivalent. Am I for impersonal sex or against it? For the city or against it?”<sup>266</sup> Halsted’s reordering is a form of reanimating and highlighting these questions and a tangle of feelings towards sex and the outside world.

Returning to the descriptions at the top of this chapter, the orderings of *L.A. Plays Itself* inform the parameters within which the authors cited were able to describe the film’s content or meaning. Yet there are still other ways *L.A. Plays Itself* can be thought about as a series of interlocking and switchable parts. Instead of positing *L.A. Plays Itself* as a documentation of Halsted and Yale’s dynamic I wish to show how the ordering and exhibition of the film formatted their relationship, a relationship between stud and super-twink.

## CO-PERSONS

There is a document in the file dedicated to Fred Halsted in the archives of the Museum of Modern Art that reads like a rambling marriage certificate. It reads:

on Friday may 2, 1975 (this date selected by our astrologer Arne Klein) FRED HALSTED and JOSEPH YALE will be legally united in a form of law known as

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<sup>266</sup> Byron “A Commonplace...” (1972a), 2. Quoting Fred Halsted.

MARRIAGE. we do not agree that this is the state of union we are beginning..but in terms of law today we accept it. in our opinion we are entering into the status of HALSTED CO-PERSONS.. i am FRED HALSTED JOSEPH YALE will be JOSEPH HALSTED.. he is not my wife and i am not his husband but we will both be HALSTED CO-PERSONS..FRED HALSTED is a MALE CHAUVINIST and JOSEPH YALE is a SEXIST.. YALE is not a chauvinist and HALSTED is not a sexist.. WE further agree that HALSTED is a STUD AND YALE is a SUPER-TWINK.. HALSTED is YALE’S master and YALE is his slave.”<sup>267</sup>

The document is signed by both Fred Halsted and Joseph Yale. What the document represents is the structural terms of Halsted and Yale’s relationship, which for years intrigued gay presses. Indeed, an interview from 1981 with Halsted and Yale focuses almost exclusively on the “notorious” couple and their stormy relationship.<sup>268</sup> The designations given and voluntarily taken up by the two men – Halsted a male chauvinist and stud, Yale a sexist and super-twink – conformed to the public image each built for himself and the other, and furthermore existed reciprocally, in relationship to one another. The stud (sadist/top) needed the super-twink (masochist/bottom) just as assuredly as the super-twink needed the stud. We might posit these dyadic positions as a particular form of Nancian being-with, as each role serves to reinforce and constitute the other, while remaining separate and distinct.

Such was this connection of being-with, between Halsted and Yale, that long after their professional and personal lives grew apart in 1984, articles in gay and leather

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<sup>267</sup> I have opted to leave texts by Yale and Halsted as they are without correction as part of their contribution to the language of leather was linguistic, and furthermore *visually* linguistic. The use of ellipses and capitalizations is a hallmark of Halsted’s writings, an interruption of grammatical rules. It might be tempting to think of this document only as a tongue in-cheek send-up of more traditional notions of marriage, and there is certainly there is language that would normally not be found in a marriage certificate. However, in a *Village Voice* article published exactly a month after the date on the marriage certificate, writer Konstantin Berlandt remarks that, “Newlyweds, Fred and Joey were married May 2 and plan to legalize their union in Sweden soon.” Berlandt, 69.

<sup>268</sup> Hughes, 8.



magazines continued to mention both men in the same breath.<sup>269</sup> In an interview given the later in the same year that the marriage certificate was signed, Halsted makes clear what he perceived to be the purpose of marriage:

[Marriage] unites you in more ways than physically being united. It also unites you karmically – it's more emphatic! You know you can have lovers – but they can come and go with ease. Once you form a marriage – I'm not saying it has to be certified by the government as a marriage – that's a definite and stronger commitment than having, say a lover or someone you're in love with. Like Joey and me – we can go off and do our own things, sometimes. We can have fights.<sup>270</sup>

While Halsted's statement at first seems to adhere to normative visions of heterosexual marriage, the difference for Halsted and Yale is that sexual exclusivity was never part of their contract. Perhaps this is in part due to the pair's lines of work and income-stream, running a company that produced pornographic films that they themselves starred in. More importantly, though, is that Halsted and Yale's caveat exposes the value-system privileged by gay urban men in the 1970s – in much the same way that Rechy's vomit expresses a visceral response (and thus counter) to the same set of values. In drafting and signing the document, both Halsted and Yale point to the foundations of a gay culture that privileges sex before heterosexual structures of husband and wife – or husband and husband.<sup>271</sup> Perhaps they also embed their own entrepreneurial interests in that they name each other Halsted co-persons, a corporate and generic branding of their relationship. Being Halsted co-persons also implies ownership, as Yale's identity is subsumed under Halsted's. Although the marriage certificate is

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<sup>269</sup> Fairbanks, 19.

<sup>270</sup> Mikhail Itkin, "Maverick interviews America's First Family of Gay Male S/M, The Halsteads[sic]," *Maverick*, Nov. 1975, 11.

<sup>271</sup> Itkin, 10.

unorthodox, the underpinning structure of marriage, a binding contract with spiritual (re: karmic) implications, remain normative in this regard.

It was precisely this karmic balance that was disturbed when Halsted and Yale ended their personal and professional relationship in 1984. Yale died less than two years later from complications relating to AIDS. The last five years of Halsted's life were marked by, "...chronic alcoholism, and manic depression for which he had been under a doctor's care many years and treated with Thorazine."<sup>272</sup> It was during this time that he moved back to Orange County from Los Angeles and acquired a skin rash, produced by mixing anti-depressants and alcohol. What for some might have been a minor medical annoyance was for Halsted one more reason to leave the living world – as stated in his suicide note of 1989:

I want to be with Joey. I'm a has-been and now I can't get anything produced. I'm broke and can't get a job in my field. My skin is all fouled up. I've had a good life (I was student body president of my high school, the overwhelming passion of my youth). I've had looks, a body, money, success and artistic triumphs. I've had the love of my life. I see no reason to go on.<sup>273</sup>

Beyond Halsted's vanity – a virtue worth fostering in the porn industry – what is most remarkable is his multiple mentions of Yale. For Halsted, becoming Halsted co-persons was no mere stunt, but rather a serious endeavor in which he sought to bind Yale to him, and vice versa, through life and death. It was precisely when Halsted was no longer able to acknowledge, even after the pair's split, that he continued to be-with Joey that he committed suicide.

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<sup>272</sup> Fairbanks, 19.

<sup>273</sup> Fairbanks, 19.

The marriage agreement was perhaps precipitated, in part, by an event that happened a month earlier, in April of 1975. It was in that month that Fred Halsted and Joey Yale sat on a panel at a Gay Awareness Week conference presented by the Gay Student's Union of UCLA. Initially proposed as a panel on the "Diversity of the Gay Lifestyle," by the time the conference was held there was already a complete turnover of panel participants, and so the panel focused solely on the intimate mechanics of leather.<sup>274</sup> While accounts of the panel vary, we know that Halsted and Yale "candidly diagrammed the public relations campaign [Halsted] had devised to position himself as the ultimate macho stud."<sup>275</sup> One of the ways that Halsted did this was to clarify and cement the language he used to describe his relationship with Yale:

I've tried to get away from 'somasochism,' which was laid on us by the psychiatrists, and 'slave and master,' which sounds too much like the Civil War. Because of the connotation of such expressions, people into S&M often feel 'bad' or 'sick' about it and people who aren't into it are afraid of it... So I've come up with 'stud' for the S and 'twink' for the M. You really can't have a negative reaction to those words.<sup>276</sup>

Halsted is one of the few leathermen to openly acknowledge the racial implications of using the designations "master" and "slave." It is clear that Halsted was made uncomfortable by these terms' association with American slavery, and thus refused to use them. And yet, that same year he used the terms in the marriage certificate – pointing to not only an uncomfortability but an ambivalence as well. Halsted also dismisses the term "somasochism" as this is, at its core, a historically situated pathological diagnosis "laid on us."

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<sup>274</sup> Jeanne Barney, "S&M: Out of the Closets and Onto the Campus," *Drummer* 1, no. 1 (1975): 9. Initially the panel was to feature "Goldie Glitter, Larry Townsend and Sandy Schmidt, a pre-operative transsexual."

<sup>275</sup> Fairbanks, 19.

<sup>276</sup> Barney "S&M: Out...", 9.

Halsted expressed a strong need to create a worldview that described the activity of leathersex as neither sick nor invested in the continuance of racial dominance. Instead Halsted attempted to find words which would not produce a “negative reaction,” thus he preferred the use of “stud” a term borrowed from animal husbandry, and referring to a reproducing male, and “twink” which Halsted and Yale later took credit for coining.<sup>277</sup> As zealous as Halsted and Yale were to claim the origins of “twink,” the word was documented in the 1963 version of *American Speech*, implying a common use, at least on college campuses.<sup>278</sup> In this source a twink is described as one of the “less frequent, but more expressive, phrases” for “An effeminate young man, a sissy,” alongside “music major,” “petunia,” “weenie,” and “faggot.”<sup>279</sup> This description matches the visual self-presentation of Yale – at the UCLA conference, for example, Yale appeared not in full leather and a collar, but “turned out in an ice cream suit and powder blue sweater.”<sup>280</sup> The presentation of effeminacy, preppy-ness and sissyness aligns neatly with the proscribed role of the twink bottom, which is how Yale often presented his on-and-off camera persona. The strong reference to the hostess snack-cake, the Twinkie, would seem to confirm this alliance with bottoming, as a bottom at the end of sex would ideally be just like the snack-cake, filled with cream. While Halsted and Yale didn’t create the word or prototype for “twink,” their belief that they did indexes a kind of cocky self-assuredness, reinforcing the couple’s strong penchant for myth-making and self-presentation.

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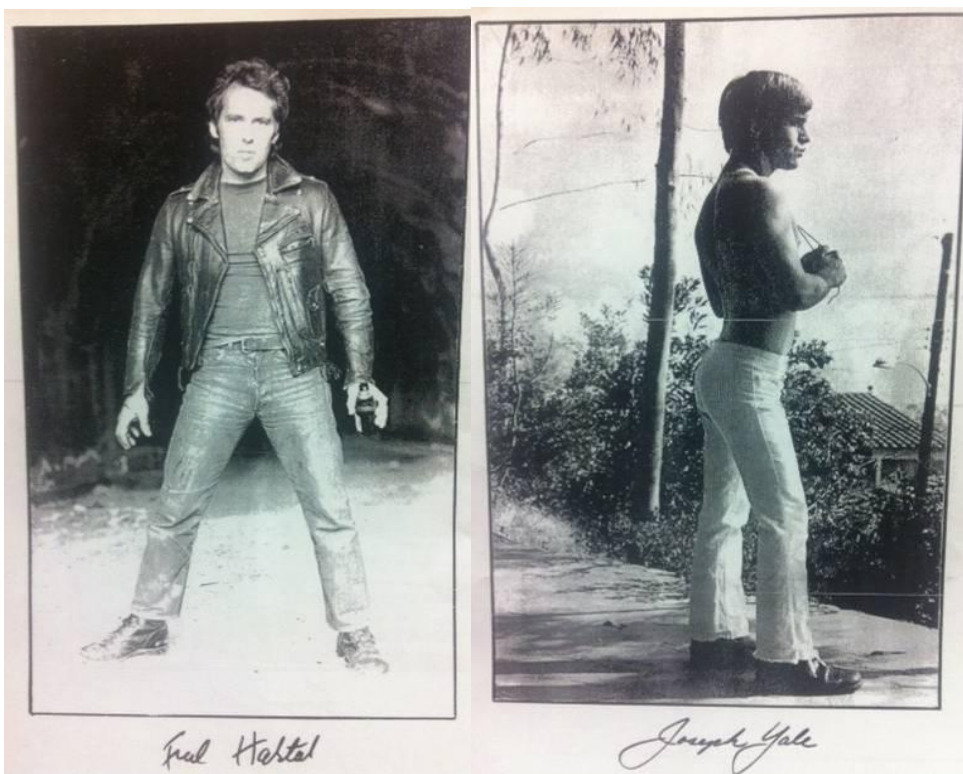
<sup>277</sup> Hughes, 9.

<sup>278</sup> Alan Dundes and Manuel R Schonhorn, “Kansas University Slang: A New Generation,” *American Speech* 38, no. 3 (1963): 163-177.

<sup>279</sup> Dundes, 171.

<sup>280</sup> Barney “S&M: Out...”, 9.

Around the same time that Yale and Halsted decided to become Halsted co-persons Fred Halsted was releasing his third independent feature *Sextool*.<sup>281</sup> In promotional materials for the film Halsted and Yale's personae are confirmed on a double sided 8 x 10" glossy photograph [figs. 5.3, 5.4]. One side depicts Halsted and the other Yale. Fred Halsted stands in front of a cavernous tunnel-like space, legs apart and frontal to the camera. A beer bottle, held in his left fist, tips slightly towards the viewer, and his right hand - in a mimetic gesture of his left - grasps a patch of air about the same girth as a beer bottle. Wearing boots, jeans, a t-shirt and a leather jacket, Halsted is a picture of leather masculinity. His face is stoic, eyes penetratingly looking at the camera, and his auburn hair coiffed up.



Figures 5.3, 5.4: Cosco, double-sided 8x10" press photograph.

<sup>281</sup> Itkin, 11.

The reverse image couldn't be more different. Yale stands on a slab of concrete and is positioned in right profile. The profile not only allows us to view the features of Yale's face - pursed yet streamlined – but also the profile of his lower back and ass. A pair of light-colored, tight jeans further defines Yale's body, and his loafer-like shoes indicates he is dressing in an emergent prep style. The shirtless Yale faces towards the city (Los Angeles), power-lines and Spanish-tiled rooftops under his gaze; behind him are elements of nature, grass, bushes and a tall rigid tree trunk – a counterpoint reinforcing the sinuous lines of Yale's backside. Yale holds a piece of string which wrapped around his neck in a loose collar tensely away from his body, perhaps a subtle reference of his position as a bottom and a slave.

Halsted appears frontally, showcasing his groin and face, whereas Joey appears sidelong emphasizing his backside. Halsted is looking, Joey is being looked at. When held up to the light, the photograph reveals that halsted's groin aligns with Yale's ass; it is a photographic fuck. The body language of the two images tells us which roles are assumed – top and bottom, S and M, stud and twink – and these are dyadic; Joey is not the fucker he is the fucked, just as Fred is the fucker and is not the fucked. This reiterates the kinds of tight boundaries implied in the marriage certificate, and the parsing of roles – chauvinist and sexist. This dyadic relationship is also summed up by Halsted's longtime friend Jeanne Barney, a seminal figure in leather history who served as editor of *Drummer* magazine during its first issues as a glossy. Barney describes the relationship between Halsted and Yale in oppositional terms, "Fred was talent and Joey was business.

Fred was grungy Levi's and boots; Joey was powder blue cashmere sweaters. Fred was dark; Joey was light. Fred loved Joey far more than Joey loved Fred..."<sup>282</sup>

Yale's persona is difficult to grasp, Yale wrote less than Halsted, and fewer contemporary writers and critics mention Yale as a significant figure. But it is odd and remarkable that someone who prefers "powder blue cashmere sweaters" is given a central place in the leathersex narrative that Halsted tells in *L.A. Plays Itself* – as elsewhere in the leather community twinkie gay men were barely tolerated or openly disdained. Many leather bars specifically banned the wearing of sweaters.<sup>283</sup> Even Joseph Yale's name implies twinkie-ness. Although his last name in *L.A. Plays Itself* is listed as Yanichek, his birth name was Yanoska. It was not uncommon for pornographic actors and erotic artists to take up aliases, alternately emphasizing or masking a physical quality. In the case of Yale, his porn name emphasized his role as a preppy bottom, as Yale is an overt reference to the Ivy League American institution. With the last name of Yale, Yanoska's blonde mop and white muscular body signalled a Northeastern affluence, as opposed to his Eastern-European/Russian ancestral background, raised in a middle-class suburb of Indianapolis, Indiana.<sup>284</sup> Yale is credited as Yanichek at this early point in his career.

Yet Yale's twinkie-ness was more complicated. In a sequence of photographs produced for *Package* magazine, the magazine founded and run by the Halsted co-

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<sup>282</sup> Jeanne Barney, e-mail message to author, March 2, 2011.

<sup>283</sup> Nowhere is this more evident than The Mineshaft dresscode, which was posted outside of the infamous New York City leather club. It forbids sweaters along with dress pants and shirts, colognes, disco drag and dresses, while plaid shirts, Western wear, uniforms and t-shirts are welcome. Categorizing these coded garments made the preference clear, masculinity was welcome while markers of femininity was out.

<sup>284</sup> Here the last name masks a regional and class identity. Other members of S/M communities used their monikers as masks, with perhaps the most well-known example being Dom Orejudos, who went by both Stephen and the more Francophone, Etienne. Unlike Yale, however, Orejudos wasn't as nationally visible on film screens – so the moniker ended up masking not only his name but his ethnicity as well.

persons, Yale wears a T-shirt emblazoned with “Super M” in a font similar to a superhero’s logo [fig. 5.5].<sup>285</sup> He wears this shirt underneath a black leather jacket with the collar popped. Atop Yale’s head is a black leather motorcycle cap. In his hand, which is held in a loose simulation of a fist, he holds a lit cigarette. He addresses the camera directly. Signals are mixed here; the “Super Twink” is decked out in leather gear. This is perhaps Yale’s most intriguing quality, one that Halsted doesn’t share – the ability to switch his signifying system from one type of expression of gay male sexuality to another. Certainly this ability is abetted by Yale’s alliance with Halsted, and yet the opposite didn’t hold true... Halsted never dressed twink.



Figure 5.5: Joey Yale as SuperM, *Package*, no. 2, 1976.

<sup>285</sup> Joey Yale, “Stud Service.” *Package* 1, no. 2 (Sept. 1976): 25-26.



While Yanichek became Yale, Halsted's campaign to position himself as the ultimate top, Super-S to Yale's Super-M, was more about a series of carefully considered representations rather than affecting an identity through the assumption of an alias. At the release of *L.A. Plays Itself* and *The Sex Garage* Halsted was still in-process of honing and defining this image of the capital-S stud that becomes, in many ways, his legacy. But as this persona was in mid-formation, a portrait of an esoteric and polymath Halsted can be found in descriptions of him supplied by those who knew him, even in a tertiary way. Harold Fairbanks, reviewer for *The Advocate*, saying that "[Fred Halsted] is very much into body-building and S&M. He is a painter and a former landscape gardener and is the most esoteric of all people in the gay film business."<sup>286</sup> Halsted's interest in gardening is mentioned in several interviews. Indeed, before getting started in filmmaking Halsted owned a chain of nurseries in the Los Angeles area, and towards the end of his life he intended to return to the plant business.<sup>287</sup> 1969 was the year that Halsted changed careers (selling off his plant nurseries) and began to foster a sense of self that incorporated a sadist identity:

It was raining, a wet year, very unusual for Los Angeles. Spring rains 30 days in a row, floods, sliding houses. I just stayed inside all the time, smoked a joint every day, traced my life back to zero. I had been a successful businessman but sold all my plant nurseries. I had decided I wasn't getting anything out of it besides money, which I didn't care about. Everything I had ever done in my life I

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<sup>286</sup> Siebenand, 40.

<sup>287</sup> Fairbanks, 19. The scant biographical details of Fred Halsted's life before he became a filmmaker are nevertheless telling. The plant businesses grew out of Halsted's interests as an undergraduate student at Cal State, Los Angeles where he studied plant biology. He also ran in a mock election as a candidate representing the Socialist Workers Party, and then attempted to enter the real presidential race as a write-in candidate in 1968 allegedly garnering 41,300 votes. Such biographical details describe more than just these specific events and accomplishments, but reveal something about Halsted's tenaciousness and charisma.

reviewed and led me to decide that this was what I should do next: an autobiographical homosexual story, which became 'L.A. Plays Itself.'<sup>288</sup>

The original title for *L.A. Plays Itself*, which was to be called *Flood Street*, reflects this origin story.<sup>289</sup> It was at this time, roughly between 1969-1976 that Halsted began to formulate his particular views on homosexuals and gay culture. Owing allegiance to himself before a movement, Halsted commented "I consider myself a pervert first and a homosexual second."<sup>290</sup> Although Halsted wrote about how he had his first "daddy experience" as a teenager, it was in 1975 that he truly began to cultivate a nationally public image as a stud.<sup>291</sup> Part of this campaign included creating and editing *Package* magazine with Joey Yale, which ran for six issues during 1976-1977. The magazine featured editorials by Halsted in which the author makes his views on homosexuality and politics in general clear.

Halsted's image of the stud is also made clear in a series of half a dozen columns he wrote for *Drummer* magazine between 1975 and 1978. Halsted's first column takes the form of a film review of leather scenes in Hollywood films of 1975.<sup>292</sup> In this column Halsted reviews *Mandingo* ("12 INCHES on the JOHN HOLMES 14 INCH SLIDE RULE"), *Tommy*, *Alice Doesn't Live Here Anymore*, and *Rollerball*. He ends with a mini-manifesto, written in his inimitable style featuring a bold use of capitalization and partial ellipses, on the topic of S/M and revolution, one that tries to separate the ritualized erotic violence of S/M from larger political machinations:

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<sup>288</sup> Berlandt, 2.

<sup>289</sup> "Cineprobe: An Evening with Fred Halsted," [press release] Museum of Modern Art, 1974.

<sup>290</sup> Siebenand, 222.

<sup>291</sup> Fred Halsted, "Fred Halsted by Fred Halsted," *In Touch for Men*, no. 56 (June 1981): 52-56.

<sup>292</sup> Fred Halsted, "Fred Halsted," *Drummer* 1, no. 2 (Aug./Sept. 1975): 38.

CAN S/M EXIST IN THIS FUTURE.. S/M is sexual non-conformity and total obedience to the INDIVIDUAL SADIST by the worshipping MASOCHIST.. SADIST-GOD in the altar of love deeper than death.. IF (as [Rollerball] suggests) we are only allowed VICARIOUS VIOLENCE what of our temples of flesh?? .. are you as a MASOCHIST allowed to serve your STUD until DEATH DO YOU UNITE FOREVER? .. or is your only allegiance to the corporation/state and is this not almost HERE NOW? the present corporate states of the “western” world are as enslaving as the communist states of the “eastern” world .. in both we must fight for our individual rights to erect our own temples and be worshipped and to worship as we feel .. and our love is surely the highest known .. SEXUAL NON-CONFORMISTS are the only carriers of the torch of freedom .. BUSINESS/POLITICS is the EXTINCTION of that freedom and WE as the freely evolving sexual are the VANGUARDS OF THE REVOLUTION!!!!!!!!!!!!<sup>293</sup>

In the columns that follow Halsted changes direction and instead uses his space in *Drummer* to detail the many encounters with tricks he has. Most of these columns consist of erotic (non)fiction, replete with the language found in pulp paperbacks of the time. Yet Halsted also interrupts these erotic narratives with bits of political commentary or a reference to a piece of music that would otherwise be seen as Twink-y or effeminate. For instance, in one column Halsted details picking up three “marine bikers,” and as foreplay Halsted campily plays Dolly Parton’s *Here You Come Again* on the jukebox.<sup>294</sup> In another instance he guides his readers to a Donna Summers poem; as a reigning queen of disco Summers would signify a style of dress and music often at odds with leather.<sup>295</sup> The emergent picture of Halsted is not only one of a sexual top, but also a politically-engaged commentator on homosexual communities and their varied relationships to sex and popular culture. Thus, by bringing together signifiers of seemingly incommensurate styles (disco vs. leather), Halsted enacts a kind of political commentary which sought to reveal, through parody and excoriation, the self-policed limits of each kind of gay

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<sup>293</sup> Ibid.

<sup>294</sup> Halsted (1977), 79.

<sup>295</sup> Fred Halsted, “Fred Halsted,” *Drummer* 3, no. 22 (1978): 79.

community. Halsted often pushed these boundaries, and this became part and parcel of his persona as a public-top, privileged enough to righteously claim signifiers that challenged accepted leather doxy. In this way Halsted worked to create a highly individualized identity during a decade in which “clone” was increasingly used to describe any man affecting leather dress.

A few years after the completion and first exhibition of *L.A. Plays Itself* and *The Sex Garage*, the Halsted co-persons co-founded Cosco Studios, which was a production and distribution office outfitted to handle all of Halsted and Yale’s future filmic output and their ancillary publishable photo-textual materials, such as glossy 8x10”s and photo-play booklets. This was not the pair’s only venture. In the years that followed Halsted and Yale founded and ran a leather club called Halsted’s, and in 1982 they shot a pornographic feature called *A Night at Halsted’s* at the venue. Additionally, the entrepreneurial pair owned and operated a print-store, Cosco Printing, from 1980 to 1982.

When Halsted and Yale consolidated their business interests to form Cosco Studios it was Yale who maintained executive control over business operations and the production of films.<sup>296</sup> In business, at least, Yale was on top. This contradiction in terms/roles may not be a revelation to anyone who lives with and explores seemingly solid sexual roles, as there are ways that bottoms can “top from the bottom,” and conversely tops can “bottom from the top.” Halsted wrote of this in one of his many columns for *Drummer Magazine*:

***The actively passive man certainly is NOT out of control of the situation. The alert bottom can control almost any sane top, and very simply, without losing***

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<sup>296</sup> Jeanne Barney, e-mail message to author, March 2, 2011.

*the sexual tension of the scene.* He directs the top man into the scenes. In many ways *the top man is sexually exploited* and forced into narrow roles by the bottom. There is SO much he can't do that maybe he would like to do, but doesn't 'cause it would reduce his image. Gays also get trapped into straight stereotypes of masculinity. The old gay stereotypes of the gay stud who is greek active and french passive PERIOD clearly needs to be liberated... Gayness so frightens straights because it is so attractive.<sup>297</sup>

I might add that it potentially frightens because under the fascia of codified sex roles it is a more mutable and changeable, unfixed way of living and fucking. This was indeed the case for Halsted who maintained the persona of stud/top throughout much of his career, while sporadically rupturing "old gay stereotypes" of the total stud, and for Yale who despite his Super-twink persona was heavily invested in leather aesthetics and sex. Halsted rarely gave up the image that he was always the penetrator, always the fucker and never the fucked. But he candidly admitted several times (as he did here) that the conventional wisdom that neatly aligns power and control don't hold true in an leather sex scene. The only instance when his onscreen role switched was the piercing film advertised through R.F.M., excerpted in my third chapter.

However, for interviewers, Halsted would often appear out of onscreen persona. This is apparent in a 1975 article for *The Village Voice*, in which writer Konstantin Berlandt describes Fred Halsted:

In person, however, Halsted doesn't come across as the meanest man in the world; 34, dark hair, blue-gray eyes, about five foot eight, he looked more like a graduate student in baggy blue corduroys and sweatshirt the May afternoon I visited him and his lover Joseph Yale at home in Hollywood. There was nothing in his manner to suggest that the sadist stud he plays on and off camera might leap across the kitchen table at any moment.

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<sup>297</sup> Halsted (1978), 79. (emphasis original)

During a peaceful five hours sipping Tab and staring out the living room window at a distant, almost Xerox copy of downtown Los Angeles in the valley below, Halsted played the intellectual, philosopher, political analyst, except in light exchanges with Joey.<sup>298</sup>

What this passage reveals is the degree to which Halsted has to be consciously untangled from his persona of a stud. Berlandt juxtaposes Halsted's grad student appearance with the urban idyll of the valley, almost too good to be true – a simulacra of the world perfected and thus approaching a xerox. Beer is not Halsted's drink of choice here, as it was in the double-sided glossy discussed above, but rather Tab soda which was positioned as an effeminate drink in the 1970s. Also: Halsted doesn't drink – he sips.

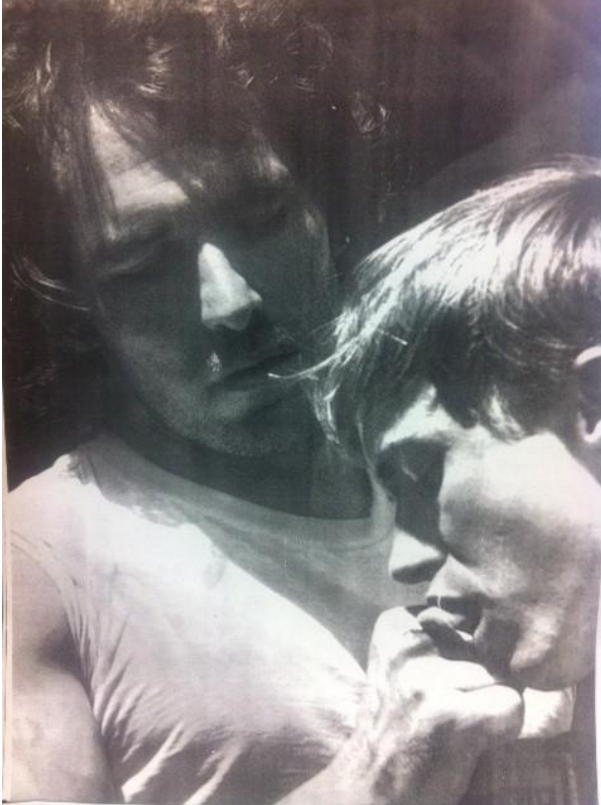
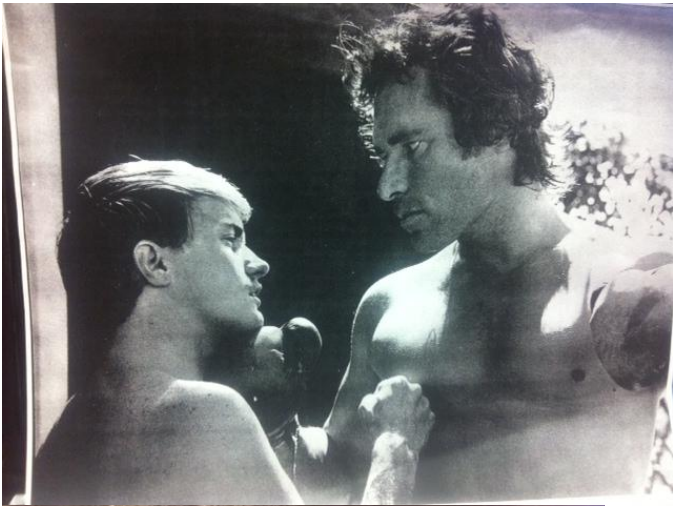
The photo that accompanies this article redoubles this nicer, sweeter image of Halsted [fig. 5.6]. It is another still image from *Sextool*, and in it Halsted is positioned over Yale. The camera is placed slightly below and to the left of Yale's body, creating a strong diagonal from Halsted's head in the top left of the frame to Yale's head in the bottom right. Halsted, in a white t-shirt – sleeves rolled up – presents his fist to Yale's face. A BilTuff boxing glove is slightly visible beneath his fist. Yale, eyes lowered, licks a bloody sore on Halsted's knuckle. The sequence that this picture belongs to details a slew of leather activities, from boxing and beating, to piercing and finally this act of wound-licking [figs. 5.7, 5.8]. While the eroticism of the knuckle-licking picture is apparent, the violence of the leather activity is implied and not actualized. It is an image of a homosexual coupling that, as the title of the article cheekily exclaims, "The Whole Family Can Enjoy." And truly, it is sweet.

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<sup>298</sup> Berlandt, 2.



Figure 5.6: Still from *Sextool*, accompanying an article by Konstantin Berlandt for *The Village Voice*, 1975.



Figures 5.7, 5.8: Stills from *Sextool*, 1975.

As if to highlight the disjunctive appearance of Halsted in and out of his public persona, Berlandt's article goes on to describe the Hollywood press party for *Sextool*, an event at which Fred Halsted, "suddenly exploded, threw his beer bottle against the wall,



grabbed and smashed cups away from two guests, and then grabbed Joey and fucked him on the living room floor.”<sup>299</sup> In bringing these two instances of description to the fore I am not trying to decipher where the ‘real’ Halsted exists, or even if a ‘real’ Halsted exists – rather, I want to highlight the multiple ways that Halsted and Yale acted and how this behavior was perceived by viewers, as well as by pornographic and mainstream presses. This incident highlights Berlandt’s worry that Halsted “might leap across the kitchen table at any moment” by foregrounding the very real possibility that such an event had already occurred. Like the image that accompanies Berlandt’s article, the threat of leather is perceived as a possibility, yet left unfulfilled, whereas the violence of throwing and smashing beer bottles is a preamble to an act of public sex. Berlandt shows a marked lack of understanding of the basic dyadic structure of Halsted and Yale’s leather relationship; their contract was with each other.

This subtle ambivalence of Halsted’s persona is augmented in an exchange in *Package* no. 5, in the “Discipline” section (letters to the editor). A reader from Denver complains that “the watercolor queen on your staff must be up to her heels in joy juice. Fuck these banal stories... Pretty Boy was pretty, but I would like to see that big cock erect.”<sup>300</sup> The complaint regarding the brightly colored covers of *Package* hit a nerve with Halsted as his response was to caustically shoot back, “as far as big cocks go I hope you find a 12 incher and choke in your own fuckin vomit. If you’re not man enough to appreciate hand tinted covers you should save your \$2 and get a more stereotyped male.”<sup>301</sup> These covers [fig. 5.9] often feature a single male model, shirtless and either wearing underwear (a jock strap in the case of issue number four, the cover under

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<sup>299</sup> Berlandt, 70.

<sup>300</sup> “Discipline,” [letters to the editor] *Package* 1, no. 5 (1976): 24.

<sup>301</sup> Ibid.

critique) or jeans. The California sun glints off of black and mirrored aviator sunglasses, while one or both hands creep beneath the garments that hide the goods. The hand-tinting renders these images effuse with color and pattern, an odd image to be put in such close proximity with Fred Halsted's name – and yet, Halsted strongly defends these images as they are “exposing the new look in men.”<sup>302</sup> Here again is Halsted reordering gay stereotypes, incorporating the effeminate aesthete into his persona. This discussion of the aesthetics of *Package* covers recalls the debates that critics held over *L.A. Plays Itself*. Was it film art or amateurish trash? A butch or femme aesthetic? Reordering, then, is the hallmark of self-making and filmmaking, and it suggests that Halsted's output is productively both. Artist or amateur? Butch or femme? Both!

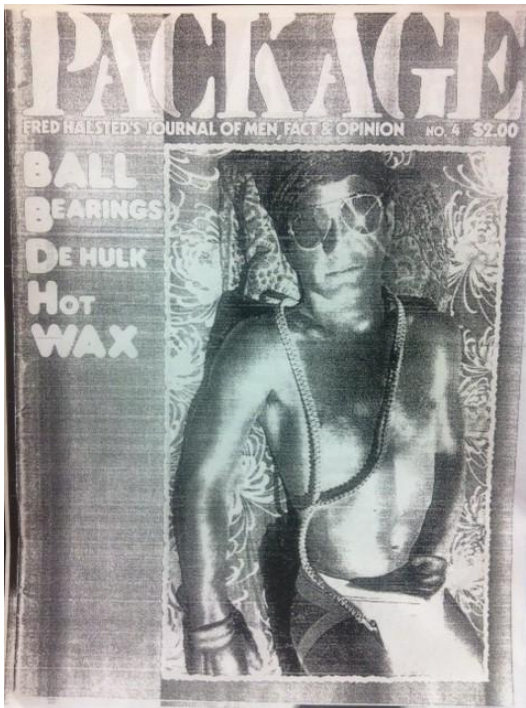


Figure 5.9: *Package* [cover], no. 4, 1976.

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<sup>302</sup> Ibid.

Contrary to what I've found to be evidence of intentional self-making, some contemporary writers still view Halsted as naïve. This point of view is most clearly expressed in Gary Morris' critical review of Halsted's films for *Bright Lights Film Journal*:

Another thing that set him apart from this group was his pride in how little he knew about the process of filmmaking. While the work of Poole et al. had somewhat respectable production values, or at least aspired to them, Halsted's films are ragged collages of imagery, with ambient (i.e., sometimes incomprehensible) audio, confusing double exposures, and nonlinear narratives, to put it mildly.<sup>303</sup>

While Morris then goes on to compare Halsted's work with Kenneth Anger's *Scorpio Rising* and praises the former's "fuck-it-all" quality, the view of Halsted as an unsophisticated maker is condescending at best. More intriguing, I think, is to see *L.A. Plays Itself* as an experiment in self-actualization – it is a film which renders the process of reordering or switching as an analogue to the elasticity of Halsted's life/persona work.

#### **“DEEP FIST AT THE MODERN”**

Recommended for “Adults Only,” the Cineprobe screening of *L.A. Plays Itself*, *Sex Garage* and clips of *SexTool* took place at the Museum of Modern Art in New York City on Tuesday, April 23<sup>rd</sup> 1974.<sup>304</sup> The screening was sponsored by MoMA's film department under the aegis of curator Adrienne Mancina. Initially the Cineprobe series intended to “provide exposure for the independent filmmaker, a category including both

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<sup>303</sup> Gary Morris, “Private Rituals Made Public: The Lost Erotica of Fred Halsted,” *Bright Lights Film Journal*, no. 49 (Aug. 2005). Web. Accessed July 20, 2012.

<sup>304</sup> Title of this section taken from the article “Deep Fist At The Modern,” *Screw*, April 29, 1974: 11.

radically experimental filmmakers and directors of more conventional films which do not receive commercial distribution.”<sup>305</sup>

Already in its seventh season in 1974, the Cineprobe series that year included: St. Clair Bourne’s documentary on black churches entitled *Let the Church Say Amen!*, Leo Hurwitz and Paul Strand’s *Native Land*, Jan Lenica’s feature-length animation *Adam II*, Ralph Bakshi’s *Coonskin*, and then-recent work by Barry Gerson. That same year MoMA hosted programs celebrating D.W. Griffith’s Centennial, James Broughton, and began a two-year series of screenings on the “History of Film to 1970.” In a *Variety* article published the day after Halsted’s Cineprobe screening, the then-assistant curator of film Larry Kardish, reiterated that, although *Sex Garage* was cited for obscenity, the museum believed in Halsted’s talent and wanted to give him more exposure.<sup>306</sup> In recognition of this support Halsted regifted his \$100 honorarium and the 16mm prints of his films back to the Museum of Modern Art.<sup>307</sup> This gesture of generosity was in earnest, and it also was a clever way to ensure that his films entered into the permanent collection of the museum, a fact that no one, least of all Halsted, ever forgot. Always the entrepreneur, Halsted would often harness this fact in pitching upcoming directorial projects. *Screw* magazine, a heterosexual pornographic weekly aimed at men, which had two-years previously reviewed both *L.A. Plays Itself* and *Sex Garage* as “classics of the ‘70’s and the homosexuals’ *Gone With the Wind*” remarked upon the Cineprobe screening, “The Museum of Modern Art will be validating [our] prophesy.”<sup>308</sup> The prophesy was that gay pornographic film would attain a level of recognition unbeknownst to its practitioners.

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<sup>305</sup> “Cineprobe series begins seventh season as forum for independent filmmakers,” [press release] Museum of Modern Art (Sept. 1974): 1-2.

<sup>306</sup> “Sado-Maso Sex Makes Art Museum,” *Variety*, April 24, 1974.

<sup>307</sup> Ibid.

<sup>308</sup> “Deep Fist at...”, 11.

Truly, more daily and weekly newspapers remarked upon Halsted's MoMA screening than in 1972 when the films were first screened. And nearly every obituary and article regarding Halsted and/or Yale post-1974 mention MoMA's ownership of *L.A. Plays Itself* and *Sex Garage*. Such claims to credibility gave Halsted the ability to procure larger arthouse/pornographic cinemas for screening his next feature *Sextool* and thus to advance his goal of appealing to a mass (read: not exclusively gay) audience.<sup>309</sup>

In short, the MoMA screening was a big moment for Halsted, and he knew it. And this is precisely when Halsted re-ordered *L.A. Plays Itself*. Although no documentation exists as to why Halsted made this strategic move, it suggests that Halsted was trying to make a narrative that would fit into what he thought MoMA's audience and film curators would find interesting. By switching the two acts, ordering the film so that it began in nature and staving off the more graphic sections depicting cruising and fist-fucking of the big city, *L.A. Plays Itself* began to reflect larger narratives regarding industrialization, modernism, post-industrial urbanism and capital.

Filmmakers were rarely absent for Cineprobe screenings, and indeed MoMA made it a habit to collect audio from the audience interaction with the filmmaker post-screening. While MoMA did in fact record the exchange between Fred Halsted and his audience, that audiotape has been lost. So, unfortunately, how the audience at MoMA responded to the films is at the current moment unknown. No accounts from the screening exist to draw upon, although presumably the screening went well as evidenced by the institution's acceptance of Halsted's film and the curious absence of any kind of

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<sup>309</sup> Berlandt, 69. Halsted moved venues to the Lincoln Art for this screening of *Sextool* and projected to gross five million dollars. Of gay theaters Halsted had this to say: "I've always been ashamed to play at gay theaters... because they're toilets and because the audience is only gay."

unwanted attention from city police. MoMA thus became a safehouse for these two films which had elsewhere been confiscated and tried for obscenity. The films could hide in plain sight.

One way to avoid such confiscations was by selling and distributing the film through the mail, as Halsted did through *Drummer* and *Package*. The advertising copy for *L.A. Plays Itself*, written by Yale or Halsted, is yet another description of the film, modified by a series of measurements and acronyms [fig. 5.10]: “Part 1. S&M plus the original FFA scene! 200’ color, 8mm / Part 2. Blonde meets 10” in the Malibu woods. 200’ color, 8mm.”

**PHOTO SETS**

8 PHOTOS  
(4" x 5")  
IN EACH SET

A. Toilet Herdies  
B. Studio Discipline  
C. Truckee's Golden Shower  
D. Warehouse Workout

EACH SET  
**\$7.95**

Check or money order to:  
**COSCO**  
254 S. Robertson, Dept. P  
Beverly Hills, CA 90211

State your age when ordering.  
Allow 2 weeks for delivery.



**FILM SALE**

~~REG. \$34~~  
**NOW \$20 EA.**

**SEX GARAGE**  
Leatherman runs their gang from a garage. Required stud service. 200' b&w, 8mm

**L.A. PLAYS ITSELF**  
Part 1: S&M plus the original TFA scene! 200' color, 8mm  
Part 2: Blind meets 10" in the Malibu woods. 200' color, 8mm

**TRUCK IT**  
Part 1: Roger Hockstee in truck jackstrap jack-off scene. 200' color, 8mm  
Part 2: Rear-ended with whips, chains & dildos. 200' color, 8mm

Check or money order to:  
**COSCO**  
254 S. Robertson, Dept. P  
Beverly Hills, CA 90211



Figure 5.10: Cosco advertisements, *Package*, no. 1, 1976.

This advertisement runs the numbers: the parts, one and two, now re-ordered again to reflect the initial ordering of acts; the two hundred feet of film per reel; the eight millimeters indicating the size of the film material; and the ten inches which comes to *stand in for* the hiker.

Two years after the MoMA screening why does Halsted reorder the film yet again? Perhaps it is just a simple case of a producer knowing his market, as anyone who buys Fred Halsted's magazine would be more likely interested in moving images of Fred Halsted (and of leather) before anyone else. But the advertising copy doesn't mention Halsted – only shows his image, collaged on the right side of the text.

I began this chapter with a set of descriptions of *L.A. Plays Itself* which were not my own nor Fred Halsted's. They were my initial doorways into Halsted's filmic work; it is through their descriptions that I came to desire to see *L.A. Plays Itself*. Elsewhere in the chapter I offered my own extended description and analysis of the film, which I arrived at only after viewing the film two times in the screening room at the Museum of Modern Art. Watching *L.A. Plays Itself* in the Museum of Modern Art was an experience that informed the writing and editing of this chapter, but it is only now, at the end of my efforts to describe Halsted's film and relationship with Yale that I realize how profoundly this experience affected my own reading, how I was, as Scott describes, "constituted by experience."<sup>310</sup> Unlike viewers of *L.A. Plays Itself* who may have been able to catch the film at the limited number of screenings held in New York and Los Angeles, or purchase 8mm reels for their own home viewing, my own thoughts and reading of the film were informed by the architecture (physical and ideological) of the 21<sup>st</sup> century MoMA. Among many other things, MoMA is a thorny and important institution in the development and the telling of the story of Western Modernism – not easily cast aside. To be honest, I did not expect my research into leather communities of the 1970s to lead me to MoMA. Yet, I am grateful that it did. I had never been in MoMA's archives or screening rooms, which are not open to the public but to scholars and experts who request

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<sup>310</sup> Scott (1992), 26.



access. Coming to grips with this film, watching *this particular film at this particular institution*, fostered ambivalent feelings of desire, shame and arousal, and helped me to tap into the great ambivalence of Halsted's life and projects. As Fred Halsted gifted his films to MoMA, so MoMA gifted to me a set of affective experiences to work through, a partial architecture for understanding *L.A. Plays Itself*. The description that follows is not meant to supersede the other descriptions I've offered in this chapter, but should rather serve as a pendant for a reader – unlocking previously unacknowledged aspects of the histories I've related in this chapter.

#### **DIARY OF DESIRE**

It is July 29<sup>th</sup> 2009, and I arrive at the side entrance to the Museum of Modern Art in New York City. I am here to see a couple gay pornographic films, *L.A. Plays Itself* and *Sex Garage*, by the filmmaker Fred Halsted. The films feature fantastic and magical acts of fucking – woman on man, man on man, masturbation, man on machine and finally, fist fucking. I don't know if you've ever been in this side of MoMA, or if you've been in MoMA at all – but my first impression is one of power and decadence. In a city where space is at a premium, and in a part of town where a square foot of space costs more money than I've made in my life, walking into the MoMA lobby feels like other large institutional art spaces. Clean, white, and intimidating.

I walk up to the counter, past a tall black security guard who nods at my arrival, where a gallerina (severe bangs, suit jacket, and I think a long chain necklace with a bevy of charms hanging from it) and a thin artfag (bowtie, pressed shirt, hair up and wild), both white, greet me.

“Do you have an appointment?”

Of course I do, I've flown all the way from Texas to see these movies.

"I'm here to see Charles, I'm watching a couple films." The words spill out of my mouth like so many marbles – loud, uncontrollable and awkward.

I get the "hold, please" finger – the sign to shut the fuck up, business must be done. The gallerina, who is helping me, speaks succinctly and decisively into a telephone. *Her* words are magical, they get things done and people listen. This is just an appearance; in reality she is on one of the lowest rungs of the MoMA power hierarchy. She puts the telephone down and smiles at me – I must sign in, I must get a name tag, I must be told where to go in a slow staccato – "up the stairs to the elevator.third floor.don't walk around.Charles will find you." Power, power, power, and because I've never been very good at breaking rules, although I admire those who do, I capitulate.

The wall behind the stairway is plastered with Andy Warhol's acid pink and yellow cow wallpaper, which looks like some swishy fag went to a farm, found his favorite cow and came back to the city with legal-sized hand-colored photos of her. It's funny and faggy – my favorite combination of f-words because usually fucking isn't far behind. This is true even here.

I take the elevator to meet Charles. Everyone has told me I'll love Charles, and I've had a brief email correspondence with him during the last couple months. He is polite and knowledgeable in his emails, and importantly excited I'm coming, as "no one ever really watches these films." I imagine him: obviously old enough to accrue a kind of encyclopedic knowledge but well-manicured with silvering hair. He lifts weights I further

speculate, and is a power silver-fox top. When I meet him, I hope my queer knees will knock and fail – forcing me to the ground, which is the perfect position to begin showing him my gratitude. He will take me in MoMA, and afterwards I'll meet his family – I imagine his mother to be a more accessible Gloria Vanderbilt, aloof in a Northeastern way, but striking the balance between kooky and pragmatic. She is flattened by my fantasies, as is Charles; I know I'm doing this but can't help it. I think I'm thinking about Anderson Cooper more than I'm trying to imagine Charles. Did I mention that there are glass walls in his apartment (which he *owns*) so when we fuck we are reflected in the city and the city reflects us.

It is the first, but not the last time I get hard at MoMA that day. It is also only the first instance projection.

When the elevator opens I walk into a small lobby near the staff cafeteria. This is a more human-scaled space, looking more like an office building. And then, I see Charles who is, counter to my fantasy, a short, hairy and troll-like man with a kind and smart demeanor. I'm not sure if it was the residual expectation, but I began to picture him naked. Suddenly I am back to reality – sort of – I can't stop fantasizing. Gloria Vanderbilt is replaced by the mother from *Torch Song Trilogy*. I wonder if Charles is queer; I don't think so, but it's hard to tell. The fantasy falls away as I attempt to make up for my awkwardness downstairs with a self-assuredness and kindness upstairs. It works, and we speak about how he is still excited I'm looking at these films – he says I can see the files on Fred Halsted after the screening. I can photocopy anything I want. Anything?

I am honestly grateful to this sweet and knowledgeable man, and now I am imagining a friendship blooming. He ushers me into a screening room. Small but sizeable, the theater probably holds forty or fifty people, and I am to be in it all alone. Even though the room is modest, as is the screen, it feels like I am taking up too much room. I get this space to myself for almost an hour and a half, uninterrupted, or so I think.

I put my shoulder bag down and take out a yellow pad of lined paper – and reach into my bag for a pen or pencil. I do not find one quickly, and so I run through the panic-scenario in my head. No pen means no notes; I won't remember any of this. I will go directly from MoMA to a nearby coffeeshop and transcribe. I will probably forget a lot of it, and I'll have to come back. Another trip to New York, and all because I don't have a pen. But I finally find a pen as the lights go down, and the projector starts running.

The projectionist. I forgot I wouldn't be seeing the film alone; there's the projectionist spooling and running the 16mm print through a projector. As the leader to the film scratches and spits out a series of abstract patterns I begin to imagine my projectionist. But it's more difficult; I don't have as much information as I had about Charles. I consider that this projectionist may be female, but because of my own desires I decide to imagine a male. I think it's a class thing, because all I get is the image of the multiplex projectionist – an underpaid adolescent employee who is almost always high. I replace this fantasy with one of a struggling student who goes to Columbia, New York University or the City University. It only takes a moment for this "type" to be conjured forth, slim with apple-eyes and an excitement about the art world. He looks suspiciously like the artfag at the entrance. While this is the image I begin with of my projectionist, it slowly changes over the course of the screening.

By this time the film has begun. *L.A. Plays Itself* is first, and the film begins with plunky Japanese music and protracted shots of nature. Grass, bees, rocks and flowers – in this time I am furiously taking notes, putting my fantasies on the backburner, which doesn't mean they stop talking to me, but rather I have compartmentalized their effects. There are a series of voice-overs during this first act of the film. One voice tells us that the "...city is where it's happenin'" and that L.A. has "filled up with so many New Yorkers, they're taking over everything." More images of bees and flowers. The voice-over: "What's wrong with sniffing flowers?" answers; I believe this is Fred Halsted's voice although there's no way to know for sure at this early point in the screening. "At least I ball humans!" I laugh out loud, while I know very little at this juncture in my research, I do know that before he got interested in shooting porn Halsted owned a chain of nurseries in Los Angeles. He is making fun of himself, telling us how he used to be a "flower-sniffer" but now he fucks people. I get the joke, and it makes me feel important... there is no laughter from the projectionist. It is around this time that we, the projectionist and I, see the first human body in *L.A. Plays Itself*. He is a hiker, wearing a jacket and wandering around the rocks, and he seems to be going somewhere or searching for something. More bugs. I recall something about bugs that Halsted said and I write "Bugs?!?" meaning not that I am surprised at the sight of bugs, but that I am frustrated I can't remember why the bugs aren't tripping some kind of magical recall of whatever it was Fred Halsted said about bugs.

It isn't long before a second character is introduced; this is a blonde naked man walking and looking into stream waters, a screen vision of narcissus – he is noted as "narc" in my notes. I am already building out my argument, before the film has even begun. My immediate thought is to connect the then-pervasive belief of the mainstream

psychoanalytic community that homosexuality was simply a prolonged state of arrested development, that the love object is never found due to a continued fascination with the mirror-image of the self. I wonder if Halsted was thinking of these psychoanalytic conceits. Soon the hiker comes upon this naked blonde guy, and in a moment of recognition begins to take off his jacket. The music changes to an orchestral score. Bach? Beethoven? Classical music hasn't been a love or strong suit of mine, and I find myself wishing I had an iPhone, so that I could capture some of the sound for a database to recognize. The hiker begins to rub his crotch, while the young blonde youth looks up at him and asks "Want some head?" The question is followed up by a stoner-kind of laugh. The hiker unbuckles his jeans and the blonde man begins to give the hiker head.

It is at this point that I begin to worry about my projectionist. Charles told me these films are almost never screened, and so the chances that this projectionist has seen the film are slim to none. I begin to project a new personality onto the projectionist. Instead of affected and fey, he is surly and straight. He is disgusted by the content on the screen, and he's very likely to stop the screening or get someone who has the ability to stop the screening, to which I would scream bloody murder. In an almost answer to this imagining I hear a shift in the projectionist's room – a door opening? A chair rolling? It isn't clear, but someone is moving. He is most assuredly there, and he is probably watching me watching this representation of oral sex looking for any sign of head movement, or for my hand to leave the safe space of my pen and paper for more erotically expressive zones.

I realize now how narcissistic this is – as though the projectionist has nothing better to do than watch me. But to be honest, this is exactly what I would do if I were the

projectionist at MoMA and someone was giving a blowjob onscreen. I'd split my time between looking at the screen and examining the audience – the backs of their heads – for any signs of uncomfortability or engagement. I would try to see what was happening to their pants. Is that information visible from where the projectionist is screening. I crane my head back to check – I can't see him, only the cylindrical and crystalline lens of the projector flooding light out over my head.

Something else interrupts my screening. Time and time again the door to the screening room opens for a few seconds and then closes, as though someone opened the wrong door. It happens too many times to be coincidence, and so I convince myself that the projectionist has somehow told every worker in MoMA that porn is being screened in the building. Everyone gets a look. Later I am told by friends and advisors that this is, in fact, a common and benign occurrence in MoMA's screening room.

By now the hiker and blonde narcissus have stopped having oral sex, and have moved onto swimming and joshing around in a waterfall. Soon, though, they are fucking – and by now I have had time to calm down and stop worrying so much about what everyone else is thinking/doing. I'm truly enjoying the movie, although neither the hiker nor the blonde guy is my thing – so I'm just watching with a kind of passive interest. Shots of nature intercede, butterflies and frogs. Soon the men are kissing. Then there is more sucking. Then there is face-fucking. A tattoo on the hiker's arm exclaims "USN Never Again!" A Navy boy! After a particularly Angeresque layering of natural and fucking images, our seamen shoots his own all over the face of the young blonde guy. I am thinking now of how I could compare *L.A. Plays Itself* with Kenneth Anger's *Fireworks* or *Scorpio Rising*. This could also be the architecture of my chapter on Fred

Halsted. After the ejaculation I am relieved more than anything else; I was not into the sex of this scene and so it felt interminable. Now, because of porn convention, it looks like the scene is coming to an end. But there is more layering, more nature clips – this time reversed and overlayed on images of bulldozers and some of the fucking I’ve just seen. The music is unkind, still classical in genre, but heavy and rough. This all builds to a slow zoom-out from an American flag waving over a strip mine. I was not prepared for this denouement, and so during this transistion I am furiously scribbling flat descriptive notes like: “Bulldozer / Overlaying bulldozing and fucking / Dirt and sex / Nature image often upside-down / Dramatic build- Hiker is fucking narc in these images / it’s classical music but feels like a slasher film / move from nature to industry / Modernism.” It will be difficult to pull information from these notes later, as some are about the images onscreen, others are larger ideas I want to talk about.

The scene changes to a city-scene, and I see my first glimpse of Fred Halsted on film; he is riding through L.A. in his car, cruising. I am cruising with him, like a wingman. I get to really look at him, and he has a kind of rough beauty that I recognize from the couple photographs of him I’ve already encountered. In the audio someone is asking about a book, but the soundtrack is tough to make out. I know what is coming, and I wonder how long it will take for the fisting to be shown onscreen. The montages make it difficult for me to take coherent notes, as once again I’m writing just a series of imagistic impressions. I try to make notes of what’s happening with the voice-over, two voices, one which I believe is Fred Halsted’s voice, but I lose images and feelings in the pursuit of the spoken text.



Because I know that leather is Halsted's trip, I am taking more notes than I took in the first act. I don't have the time or energy to simultaneously project fantasies onto the projectionist, and suddenly I feel that I am working – doing the work I came to New York to do. I am getting better at taking notes on what happens onscreen and on the soundtrack. Onscreen: "Tex Licking FH's boots on stairs while being whipped / Collage behind the pair with newspaper clippings most prominent reads "New Weird Cult" ... / clearly a handprint mark on Tex's ass / FH kicks T into bedroom with dirty mattress / camera low angle on ground – rope and drugs/lube? Bottle." Soundtrack: "Thumping beat, motorcycle sounds and distortion synth /not as dark – poppy, space electronic."

I have questions. Is the method Fred Halsted uses to bind the feet and hands of Joey Yale together known as hog-tying? What about that motorcycle sound; is it a motorcycle or some electronic synthesizer? But as much as I make note of my questions I also note my emotions. I laugh at the intercut image of a dog slobbering, and so I write "ha!" in parenthesis by the words "dog slobbering." My emotions at this stage in the game are parenthetical to what I perceive as the real content of the film, the shots and images.

When Fred Halsted tells the young Texan he's going to "teach him the ropes" I scribble "cute."

My writing picks up due to the fact that I am no longer trying to look down at my notepad as I scrawl, only trying to space out my sentences by feel. And at a particular moment I am stunned and stopped, only catching up with my writing later. This is the

moment when Fred Halsted stares straight at the camera. I write in caps: “SMOLDER! ... INTENSE...HE WILL FUCK US! HE IS CRUISING US.”

The “us” in my notes is the projectionist and I. Now he is complicit not only in my own fantasies but in Fred Halsted’s as well. In this screening room he can only be looking at us – as we’re neatly aligned with the center of the screen. This is the second time I get hard... I move my writing pad to cover my lap. I have confused the subject of study with the object of desire, not uncommon for me. In a film filled with sucking, fucking and fisting, it is Halsted’s gaze that erotically connects my desire and body. Sex is in the look.

The moment is immediately followed by Halsted masturbating in a harsh light. His hairy forearm and body are foreign to my conception of what a pornographic male body is supposed to look like, trim, neat and presented in a wash of even cinematic lighting. I quickly lose my erection (the blood is needed elsewhere in my body, my pounding heart and throbbing head) continuing to take notes. Fred Halsted ejaculates and then begins to cover his hand with this ejaculate. Although, it also looks like Crisco as it is thick and greasy, creating a cascade of hairy whorls on Halsted’s lower arm. Here it is; we’re being prepped for the fisting. He’s prepping himself. He is going to fist Joey using his own ejaculate as lube.

My first thought: that’s so unsafe.

I am a child of not only my time but a subject constituted by the trauma and rhetoric of the Age of AIDS. I know I am judging this film by anachronistic standards,

but it's hard to hold this back, especially because I know that eventually both Yale and Halsted end up seropositive. Yale will die from complications caused by AIDS and will consequently be blamed for the deaths of other porn stars, such as the (mostly) straight John Holmes. Halsted kills himself before the virus ends his life. He is the ultimate top – always in control, even over his own death.

While I am thinking about this Fred Halsted is hunched over Yale and playing with the young blonde's ass. Slowly he begins to slip his hand between Yale's asscrack, an action we see in profile so the space of it all is unclear. At least I think this is what is happening. The next shot confirms that yes, Halsted is sticking his fingers in Yale's ass. Soon Halsted's hand is all the way in, and I write what are my most curious pair of notes: "(I'm slightly terrorized) / Want to shout Hooray!" The whole film has been building to this, and so my desire to shout and celebrate is also a desire for cinematic climax. I am seeing the thing that *L.A. Plays Itself* is known for – the first example of fisting in cinema history. And it is not sweet or gentle, like the other scenes in this part of the film; the fisting is rough, and Yale struggles against Halsted's embedded forearm. Faces are not shown, but I imagine Yale's in a grimace of pain, Halsted's in a grin of pleasure. My notes indicate a feeling for and through both positions – my terror parenthetical; my joy exclamatory. It is a deep ambivalence. I am smiling and incredulous. Before I can leave this mental space, an image of a hand holding a football helmet flashes onscreen, I duly note it.

Then, credits.

Once more, and for the final time, I am aware of the projectionist as the lights come up. He was most assuredly watching; he had to have been – the fisting happens at the end of the reel. I wonder what he's thinking. He probably doesn't care. He's probably a she. It is noisy in the projection booth, mechanical sounds mostly of unlatching and putting the reel in its tin. He or she is busy and working, and I have work to do too. I walk a little sheepishly out of the screening room and I'm greeted once more by Charles who asks how the film was. I don't lie: "It was great!" We begin to walk towards the film archives; he tells me he's pulled some folders for me. Over the next two hours I pore over two small folders, mostly of Xeroxed articles by and about Fred Halsted. Some of these I already have, others I don't. I am immensely glad for the access.

When I am ready to leave I go down the elevator and then head downstairs past the pink cow wall-paper. I wonder if Andy Warhol ever knew about Fred Halsted. I bet he would have liked him, not really knowing why I feel that way... I walk past the desk saying thanks and goodbye to the young gallerina and the security guard. They probably don't care, but they say goodbye in response.

Outside the building I am reminded that I am in New York and not Los Angeles which is the erotic fantasyland that I left behind in the screening room.

It is hot and I have to get on the subway.

## Chapter 6: “Homo-Grown Lesbian Sexuality”

Just last year (2011) MoMA acquired AK Burns and AL Steiner’s *Community Action Center*, a “sociosexual video [...] heavily inspired by porn-romance-liberation films” such as Fred Halsted’s *L.A. Plays Itself*. I have yet to watch *CAC* in MoMA’s screening room, but I have seen it nonetheless [fig. 6.1].



Figure 6.1: Screen-captures, *Community Action Center*.

*Community Action Center* begins with a mixed-sex, mixed-gender wrestling/birthing/orgy scene, which makes use of artist’s materials (paint and clay), fruits (repurposed as bodily protrusions, a pregnant belly, a phallus, an ass), and household items (for penetration: a recurring motif). All of this happens as a voice-over of New York trans-staple Justin Vivian Bond (now just V) reads an excerpt from Jack Smith’s text “Normal Love” with delicious relish. Functioning as work, practice and play this first scene sets up the terms for the rest of *Community Action Center* – experimentalism, (mis)use of heterogenous materials, expansive sex and elastic relationships. *Community Action Center* is a collaborative video work that makes claims

– evident in its title – to being a homebase for a much broader political engagement. The “action” in *Community Action Center* is multiply meaningful; it involves political protest, community-building, acting, and sex. That there is no attempt made by Burns and Steiner to control or specify what is meant by “action” implies that all definitions could be appropriate, and furthermore, bound up in one another.

What follows is a quick succession of scenes that feature one, two or many actors in various states of sexual activity from holding to beating, from reading poetry to penetrating. Here’s a brief run-down: a leatherdyke dominates a pony-tailed woman in an old train depot; two glam drodgy femmes make out behind a mylar curtain; a young gender-queer penetrates herself with a crystal; a butchy figure cracks a belt at the top of the stairs while another licks her boots adoringly; the pony-tailed woman is tied up and pierced/threaded multiple times resulting in the adhesion of a fan of feathers on her ass and face; an act of fisting; food is erotically fed to a supine woman and then ritualistically hacked with an axe; a witch fashions and bites a phallus right before the pizza boy arrives; the leather dyke and the pony-tailed woman from earlier resume fucking until both come, one ejaculating; and finally a woman soaps up her breasts, washing a car with them and her long green garden hose.

All of this in 69 minutes.

The artists not only filmed these scenes but appeared in some of them as well. And like the rest of the cast, they use pseudonyms. AL Steiner is Juggz, she of the soapy breasts, and AK Burns is Jacques Strap, cracking her belt at the top of a stairwell [fig. 6.2]. These names point to each figure’s erotic signifying practice, and are, by turns,

titillating and funny on their own. Similar to the practices of earlier underground queer filmmakers like Jack Smith, Andy Warhol, and the Kuchars, a viewer familiar with the particular folks appearing in *Community Action Center* would recognize not only the off-camera identities of the actors, but the ways in which they are knitted together relationally through friendship, fucking and political engagement. For example, I recognize the filmmaker/artist Wu Tsang, poet Eileen Myles or performance artist MPA. All of the actors have their own varied practices, which, if a viewer is already familiar, bear on, broaden and thicken an experience of watching them at play in *Community Action Center*. For example, the slow dirge-like tune that Wu Tsang intones alongside Ashland Mines (AKA DJ TOTAL FREEDOM) in *Community Action Center*, also appears in Tsang's film *Wildness* (2012) as a way of bestowing a specific moody voice to a immigrant/queer bar in Los Angeles' Westlake neighborhood. The participants in *CAC*, many of whom are artists of one kind or another, are acknowledged as collaborators and autonomous producers/makers. Burns and Steiner actively negotiate and leave open the space between authorship and participation. Just as solo/masturbation scenes sit alongside couple and group fucking, the singular has a place alongside the plural. And so "community" is not just a buzzword in *CAC* but an organizing principle – most of the actors live and interact within the same social circle.



Figure 6.2: AL Steiner as Juggz, and AK Burns as Jacques Strap.

Burns and Steiner also campaigned and solicited donations from larger queer communities to fund and pay the actors and crew, as well as to tour *CAC* to LGBTQ centers across the nation. This may not be surprising as the artists have also been politically active in organizing to create equitable pay structures for artists; both are co-founders and participants of WAGE (Working Artists and the Greater Economy), a group that advocates for the fair pay of artists. Steiner was a member of the curatorial collective Ridykeulous, while Burns was a contributor to the queer zine collective LTTR.

Beyond the political work of Burns and Steiner (together and individually) I've found that the most glorious aspect of *CAC* is the variety of ways fucking is represented and honored. And this may be precisely because all of the modes of fucking in *CAC* fall outside of heteronormative reproductive sex: male/female coupling resulting in progeny that constitutes Gayle Rubin's inner, charmed circle of sex. Instead, all sex is recreational. Penetration is here, often with natural materials instead of rubberized dildos, and so are smacking, piercing, looking, cruising, smashing fruit, incanting, reading, hugging, and kissing. Truly, the elasticity of erotic possibility is the subject of this film. Porn genres are taken up and lovingly obliterated – as when a witch (played by K8



Hardy) is unceremoniously interrupted by a pizza delivery boy, who she then fucks [fig. 6.3].



Figure 6.3: A witch (K8 Hardy at L) is interrupted by a pizza boy.

Because I am examining the ways in which contemporary artists projects' reformat and reframe source material from 1970s leather communities I want to focus on two particular scenes, as they quote directly from or approximate Halsted's *L.A. Plays Itself* in tone. One short scene is an almost shot-by-shot remake of a sequence from *L.A. Plays Itself* – even the characters' names (Jacques Strap and Universal Twink) seem knowing winks to Halsted and Yale's, at least publicly cemented, roles. In this scene, a young butchy top (Jacques Strap) whips her belt at the top of a set of stairs, while a long-haired bottom crawls up the stairway eventually licking the boots of the dominant figure. This scene is a direct and knowing quotation of the stairwell scene from *L.A. Plays Itself*. Indeed Burns and Steiner were inspired to make this film, in part, after viewing *L.A. Plays Itself* in the MoMA screening room.<sup>311</sup> Unlike the soundtrack of the garbled southern "yokel" that plays over Halsted's original, here a voice reads the line "When

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<sup>311</sup> AK Burns, interview with author, May 12, 2012.

you're hungry you eat when you're tired you go to sleep" in a repetitive chant. The advice, simple and direct, implies the onscreen action of consensual humiliation/whipping as a need-based activity. Such relationships are positioned as necessary as food and sleep, and so Burns and Steiner make an implicit argument for the necessity of leathersex. In reconstructing Halsted's staircase sequence, the artists are involved in a process of re-transcription or re-performance, and because the bodies represented in *CAC* are queer/lesbian bodies, and because it was shot in 2010 instead of 1969 or 1970 the meanings of this sequence are inherently different. When Halsted originally shot his scene, it was a fresh and original approach to the gay pornographic genre solely defined by twinkie pornographic "loops" that featured natural settings and, at least in relation to the rest of *L.A. Plays Itself*, tame sex. When Burns and Steiner re-shoot it, and bracket the sadomasochism of their scene with a crystal penetration near a bubbling brook, it becomes a way of intimating a heterogeneous history, honoring the variety of queer visual ancestry and widening the strictly masculinist field of *L.A. Plays Itself* to incorporate a more expansive set of lesbian and queer politics.

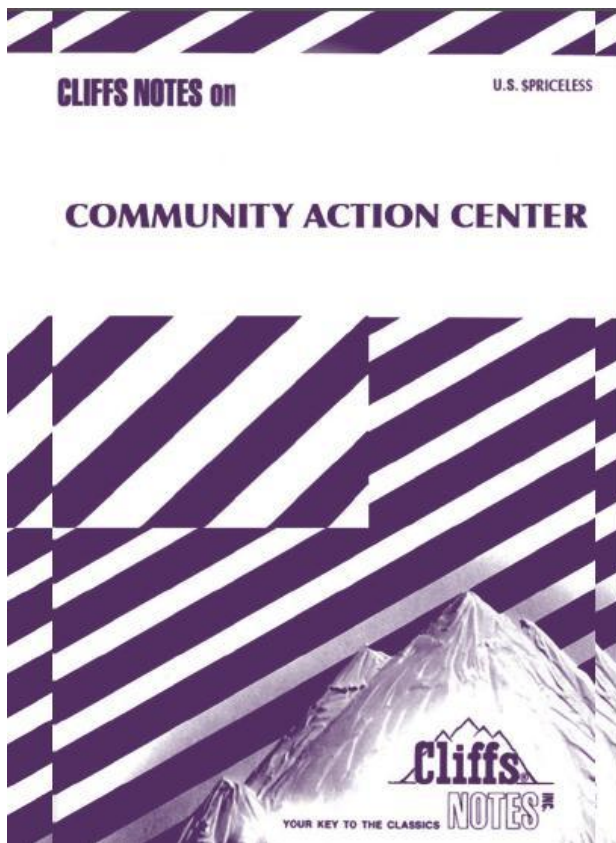


Figure 6.4: *Cliffs Notes on Community Action Center* [cover], 2010.

This is corroborated by the publication of a zine produced by Burns and Steiner, formatted in the likeness of *Cliffs Notes*, a must for any serious student of CAC [fig. 6.4]. The zine, publically and readily accessible from a variety of online sites, provides an archive of source material the artists pull from – including the “Who’s on Top?” interview between Joey Yale and Fred Halsted quoted in the previous chapter. Alongside Halsted and Yale’s interview are excerpts of Monique Wittig’s *The Lesbian Body*, an experimental novel that delights in the repetitive and orgasmic naming of body parts. Jack Smith’s *Normal Love*, Jean Genet’s *Querelle*, Angela Carter’s *The Sadeian Woman*, Leo Bersani’s *Homos*, *The Joy of Lesbian Sex*, and the Wikipedia entry on “The Feminist Sex Wars” are excerpted as well. Visual collages featuring photographs and diagrams of vaginas and vulvic-shaped formations, fisting, book covers, and erotic drawings

accompany these texts. Unlike Christian Holstad who relies on a variety of source material from multiple communities and cultures yet only privileges one as a guide, Burns and Steiner pull from a similar assortment of constellated communities (most queer) and yet rely on all of them to create their “guidebook.” Does *CAC* conform to Wittig’s idea of the erotic or Fred Halsted’s? Both. Although Wittig’s and Halsted’s notions of sex might be incommensurate, that Burns and Steiner force these diverse queer sources to rest alongside another, and so ask a viewer to make sense of their distinctiveness, indicates a desire to build an archive built upon being-with difference. What Burns and Steiner utilize a complicated set of lineages, pointing to the importance of being polymorphously promiscuous in artistic practice. Halsted and Wittig rest uncomfortably alongside one another, and yet both influences are clearly felt in *CAC*. Wittig’s joyous listing of anatomies is similar to Burns and Steiner’s filmic attention to all points of a body’s geography as sites for erotic desire and affirmation:

THE MOUTH THE LIPS THE JAWS THE EARS THE RIDGES OF THE EYEBROWS THE TEMPLES THE NOSE THE CHEEKS THE CHIN THE FOREHEAD THE EYELIDS THE COMPLEXION THE ANKLE THE THIGHS THE HAMS THE CALVES THE HIPS THE VULVA THE BACK THE CHEST THE BREASTS THE SHOULDERBLADES THE BUTTOCKS THE ELBOWS THE LEGS THE TOES THE FEET THE HEELS THE LOINS THE NAPE THE THROAT THE HEAD THE INSTEPS THE GROINS THE TONGUE TE OCCIPUT THE SPINE THE FLANKS THE PUBIS THE LESBIAN BODY.<sup>312</sup>

While AK Burns and AL Steiner are polymorphously perverse, their inclusion of *this particular passage* from Wittig, instead of one of the many others of similar all-caps lists, is telling. Here, the listing of body parts ends with “THE LESBIAN BODY.” And so Burns and Steiner slyly insist on the lesbian body as in important emblematic and

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<sup>312</sup> Wittig as quoted in AK Burns and AL Steiner, “Cliffs Notes on: Community Action Center,” (zine, self-published, 2010), 15.

ideological place. It is the physiological ability, most commonly ascribed to the female body, to have multiple orgasms which provides an organizing principle as to the pacing, structure and editing of *CAC*.

The second scene which makes reference to *L.A. Plays Itself* is more oblique, and is split into two parts. This scene not only attempts to re-embody Halsted's work but works more intently to play with and reformat the rigid roles established in *L.A. Plays Itself* between top and bottom. The two sequences between the characters listed in the credits as Leatherdyke and Working Girl (played by Max Hardhand and Stargëizer respectively) serve as internal bookends to *CAC*. They are the post-premiere and the penultimate scenes. The first is structured like the cruising segment of Halsted's *L.A. Plays Itself*. Leatherdyke leans against the wall of an automotive shop and cruises a young woman walking past her, following her across the train tracks, and upon finding a small shack/depot begins to engage in a dominant/submissive scene, using slapping and restraining to iterate a top/bottom relation. When these characters return towards the end of *CAC*, Burns and Steiner complicate the top/bottom roles established earlier. The scene at first appears to be an intensification of the power relationship previously established, but in a series of quick cuts the two characters trade places fucking and being fucked by each other. Female orgasmic possibility and genital pleasure are highlighted as both characters come (unlike *L.A. Plays Itself* in which only one person comes). The working girl even ejaculates sprays of watery fluid, serving as the liquid transition into the final carwash scene. The sounds that come from these two actors while both reach climax are some of the only diegetic sounds in *CAC*, enlivening the embodiment of female orgasm with sonic realism. In this sequence, Burns and Steiner move beyond the (I would think exciting) burden of their pornographic source material to create a scene that honors the

female orgasm, something Halsted is categorically uninterested in. But by relying on Halsted, Burns and Steiner wryly reformat Halsted's legacy within a lesbian-feminist pornographic frame.

So much for the "community" and "action" of *Community Action Center*... what about the "Center"? It's a word that seems to imply a specific place from which to speak or a place of gathering. As an ideological construction, the center is in diametrical relationship to a margin. But this kind of oppositional naming center/margin is largely dependant upon one's own positionality. If one is a member of the communities represented in *Community Action Center* one may be both marginal and central – obliterating the separating rhetoric of the center/margin opposition. Although much of the sex in *CAC* is outside of Rubin's charmed circle, the cast's ability to create a variegated and complex world where non-normative sex is, in fact, the norm, mark positions of center/margin as only faintly important.

To me, then, the meanings of "center" in *CAC* are anchored in its definition as a place, inherently tied to the film's exhibition history. And so I want to briefly, and finally, discuss and outline the three ways in which *CAC* has so far been exhibited. These three exhibitions – in New York, Berlin and Toronto – mark *CAC* as a shifting and evolving project, constantly being re-conceptualized and re-formatted by Burns and Steiner, which helps their collaboration accrue new and varied meanings. The artists name the gallery as an important space for exhibition:

Using the gallery to exer/exorcise the mystical and discreet lost spaces of homosocial configuration, the artists have created a reason and a space to reflect

on the cultural realness of homo-grown lesbian sexuality. The work aims to be a hedonistic and distinctly political adventure.<sup>313</sup>

Burns and Steiner's initial showing at Taxter & Spengemann gallery in New York was problematic in that the artists wanted to use the basement space of the gallery. The gallery, wanting to showcase the film more visibly, put the film in its main showroom. Important to the film's reception, at least to the artists, is the use of marginalized or unkempt spaces – reminiscent of the improvisatory and run-down spaces represented throughout the film, as well as the historic backrooms of leather bars and sex clubs. The professionalized clean-swept space of a Chelsea gallery communicates quite the opposite: tidiness and professionalization. Yet, consistent with Burns and Steiner's politics of honoring and maintaining marginalized positions in order to make space for radical community building, the artists hosted a Casual Separatist Friday, when the gallery became a womyn's-only space. Mashing the forms of Lesbian Separatist spaces with corporate "casual Friday," a brief ordinary-carnavalesque respite that enables higher expectations for professionalizing Monday through Thursday, reifies the mélange of source material filtered through *CAC*.

Concurrent with the end of their run at Taxter & Spengemann in New York, Burns and Steiner also opened an exhibition centered on *CAC* in the Horton Gallery in Berlin, Germany. Upon entering the gallery a viewer was greeted with a large sprawling wheat-pasted wall-collage –AL Steiner's hallmark visual style – featuring Xeroxed black and white photographs taken on set of *CAC*, appropriated posters which advertised a play about the commercially successful pornographic film *Deep Throat* (1972), and several of the color *CAC* movie posters [fig. 6.5]. In execution, the wallpapering of the gallery walls

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<sup>313</sup> Burns and Steiner, 2.

conveys a deep polysemy (similar to the archive presented in Burns and Steiner's *Cliffs Notes*) from the activist street tactics of wheatpasting to the histories of key pornographic films such as *Deep Throat* and their contemporary reverberations. Placed in front of the wall-collage is a deconstructed duratrans lightbox – the kind most often used to advertise upcoming films outside cineplexes. This particular element is most closely aligned with AK Burns' sculptural practice.<sup>314</sup> Placed on a wooden palette, the elements of the lightbox (frame, image, plexi, light, chord) are disassembled and placed in new relationships – the most striking is a florescent tube that pierces/penetrates the *CAC* poster, illuminating it but also poking a hole where there was no hole before. As penetration and the re-purposing of utilitarian objects to achieve sexual pleasure is a key tactic of the action in *CAC*, the penetrative florescent light can be seen as an extension of one of the film's lietmotifs. To get to the screening room, a viewer would pass through a curtain, vulvic in design with handstitched ruffles, made from the dropcloths used in the first orgy/food scene of the film. Splattered and dry, the curtains carry the trace of food and bodily substances – the ground upon which the action took place is now the soft barrier door through which all viewers must pass. The dropcloth curtain signals an important shift, in that the artist's reconstitute an unremarkable and utilitarian film prop as a symbol of “homo-grown lesbian sexuality.” It also brings the film, as a sited and physical process, forward into the present. By insisting that a gallery audience touch the surface on which cast members of *CAC* played and fucked, Burns and Steiner draw together actor and viewer and consistently renegotiate the terms under which *CAC* is understood and sensually felt. The curtain, to be sure, also serves the utilitarian function of limiting the amount of ambient light in the screening room. The dropcloth, like *CAC*,

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<sup>314</sup> Indeed, AK Burns confirmed that indeed the wall collages and sculptural elements in the Horton Gallery, and all subsequent installations, were conceived and completed almost separately within the Burns and Steiner's collaboration. Burns, interview.



accrues additional meanings each time the film is exhibited. The drop cloth is a ground and soft barrier, relic and surface for continued contact.



Figure 6.5: AK Burns and AL Steiner, *Community Action Center*, 2010. Mixed-media installation at Horton Gallery, Berlin.

Finally, a year later, the artists developed an exhibition for the Feminist Art Gallery (FAG) in Toronto, Canada – a garage/gallery space conceived and run by fellow artists and community activists Diedre Logue and Allyson Mitchell. In the space, much smaller than the previous two venues *CAC* was exhibited in, the artists repeated the wheatpasted poster-collage of images. However the sculptural element here was a green

plush Laz-E-Boy recliner, pierced by a vertical stripper pole – a functional piece of equipment used during the opening of *CAC* by a pole dancer outfitted in a Bud Light beer bathing suit [fig. 6.6]. The film itself was not projected here (the space too small), but rather shown on a diminutive wall-mounted screen with attached headphones. The vulvic dropcloth curtain was present, and so was the curtain made from black faux-leather from the original Taxter & Spengemann installation. Finally, the artists added the element of a public reading library, featuring books by Judith Butler, bell hooks, Pat Califia, Kate Bornstein, Henry Abelove, Gertrude Stein, and several anthologies of feminist, separatist and queer writings. The *CAC* zine was thus expanded as a library, an archive of source material. Photographs posted on facebook of the *CAC* opening in Toronto show the artists and attendees sitting in the gallery ante-room. Above them hangs some of Allyson Mitchell's knitwork – a crocheted target rug featuring a saccharine image of a bow-tied cat, framed by the text "Dyke Pussy." This particular work is framed, almost heraldically, by a small central abstract flower and two flanking crossed labyrises [fig. 6.7].



Figure 6.6: AK Burns and AL Steiner, *Community Action Center*, 2010. Mixed-media installation and performance, Feminist Art Gallery (FAG), Toronto, 2011.



Figure 6.7: AK Burns and AL Steiner, *Community Action Center*, 2010. Mixed-media installation and performance, Feminist Art Gallery (FAG), Toronto, 2011. Allyson Mitchell, *Dyke Pussy* and double labyris sculptures [at top].

The labyris, the double-headed axe, appears as the central image of the *Community Action Center* poster, held aloft by Poni, one of the actors in the video. This poster was a central element in the wheatpasted walls of *CAC*'s Berlin and Toronto exhibitions. The labyris appears again in the *Cliffs Notes* to *CAC*, as part of an excerpt

from Monique Wittig and Sande Zeig's *Lesbian Peoples: Material for a Dictionary* [fig. 6.8]. Wittig and Zeig's text lists the Labyris as the "Name given to the double-headed axe of the ancient amazons and to the representation of this arm as the emblem of amazon empires." It is a symbol of empowerment, and its use reinforces a specific kind of feminist world-making, one that privileges the symbolic of matriarchal societies. Although the labyris isn't featured prominently in *CAC* itself, the fact of its recurrence in the supporting materials (zine and poster) marks it as an important symbol nonetheless. In the *CAC* poster the labyris is an emphatic vertical extension of Poni's body. If the axe represents physical power (as weapon) and the importance of writing our own histories (as matriarchal symbol) Burns and Steiner's visual message is ultimately a call to action – in all the senses of that word:

An axe is nothing without the fist that carries it.



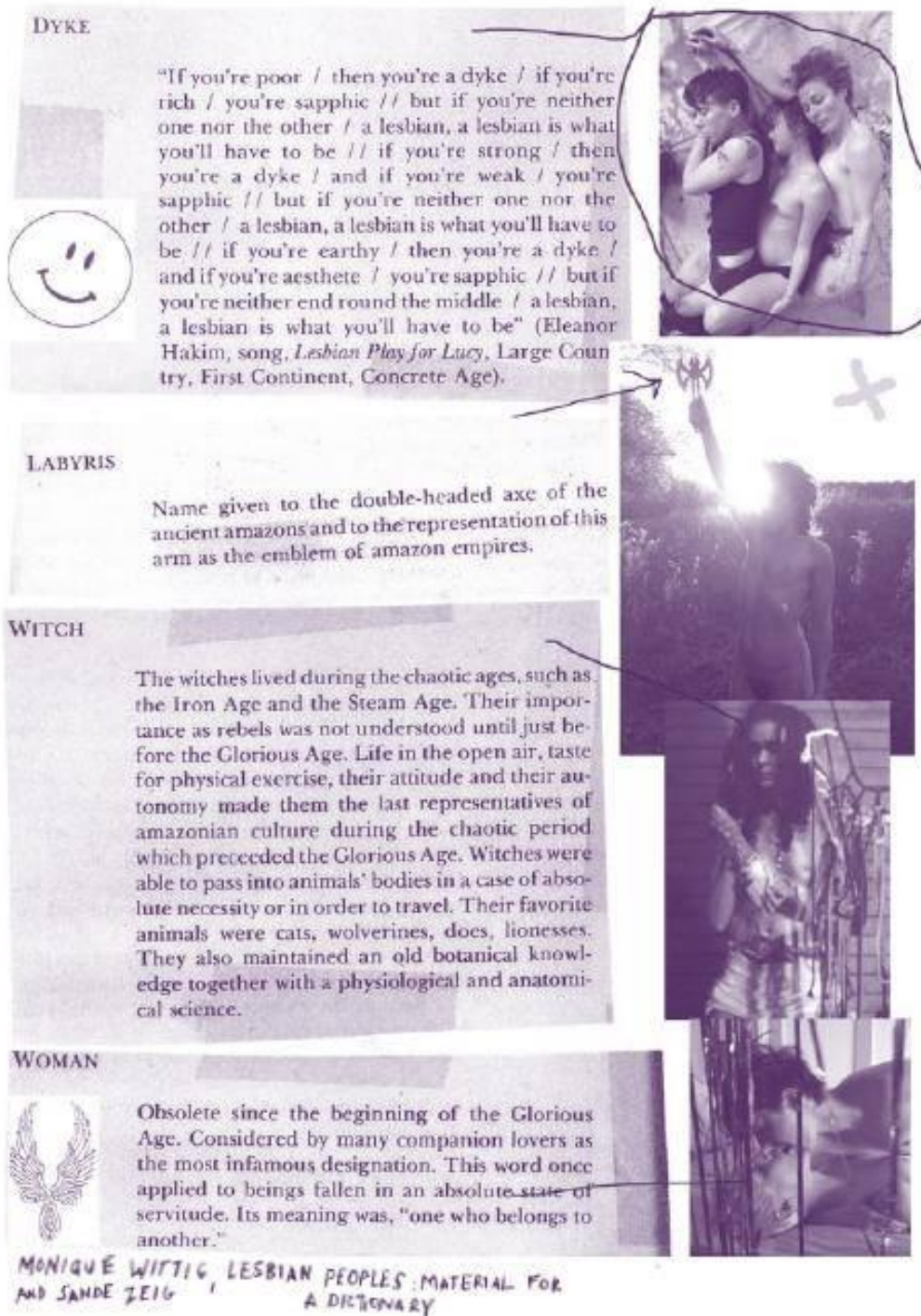


Figure 6.8: Page from *Cliffs Notes on Community Action Center*, 2010. Clippings from Monique Wittig & Sande Zeig's *Lesbian Peoples: Material for a Dictionary*, and stills from *Community Action Center*.

## Chapter 7: Viola Johnson's Pin Sash

### HUG

An illustration in the 1955 *Girl Scout Handbook* depicts two teenage girls examining a badge sash one of them wears [fig. 7.1]. The girl wearing the sash looks at it with her head bowed and mouth open, indicating that she is speaking to her companion. As she lifts the sash away from her body with her right hand, her thumb points to a particular circular badge on the right edge of her sash. The second girl looks on, cradling a book in her arms. The two girls are from different troops – 5 and 3 – illustrating not just the transmission of knowledge and an individual sense of accomplishment and pride, but also inter-troop interaction. The drawing illustrates a section of the handbook concerning “Your Girl Scout Uniform and Insignia,” and in particular the wearing of a badge sash:

*The badge sash* is a four-inch band of Girl Scout cloth and is worn over the right shoulder and fastened on the left hip. If you wear a uniform with short sleeves or the alternate uniform, or if you have no uniform, you may wear your proficiency and rank badges on a badge sash.<sup>315</sup>

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<sup>315</sup> Girl Scouts of the U.S.A., *Girl Scout Handbook: Intermediate Program* (New York, 1955), 31.



Figure 7.1: Illustration, *Girl Scout Handbook: Intermediate Program*, 1955.

The text goes on to say that proficiency badges, usually worn above the cuff of a long sleeve uniform, “show that you are prepared to use what you have learned to serve others as well as yourself.”<sup>316</sup>

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<sup>316</sup> Girl Scouts..., 81.





Figure 7.2: Viola Johnson's pin sash. On display at NorthEast Master/slave Conference in Silver Springs, Maryland, 2011.

These lessons were not lost on Viola Johnson, who patterned her leather pin sash after the one she owned as a Girl Scout in Roselle, New Jersey in the 1960s [fig. 7.2]. The choice of the pin sash as a form for keeping and displaying pins, buttons and badges

is an innovation in leatherwear of Johnson's devising. Having "no uniform" equivalent in the gay male leather scene, it reflects her past affiliation with the Girl Scouts of the USA, an organization that privileges uniform protocol as much as some leather communities. But it is also an object that indexes a continual "process of differentiation," collecting a heterogeneous assortment of discrete objects that themselves are often repositories of histories of difference and desire.<sup>317</sup> The hundreds of pins on Johnson's sash tell divergent histories, some directly experienced by Johnson and some not, some recalling specific people, events or places. In this chapter I privilege Johnson's sash, and some of the pins on it, just a few examples of such processes of differentiation. As Johnson put it to me:

Literally, my mother had my badge sash from when I was a little girl. So I took it over to a leathermaker, and asked him if he would duplicate it in leather. Which he did. I had one made in black leather trimmed in grey. And my club color was put there, just as it's centered here, and I started putting the pins on a pin sash. Well, some people thought this was the greatest thing going, some people thought it was amusing. The old leathermen went [looks askance and pauses]... "Ok!", because it was enough to honor them without trying to copy them. Only a few women crawled out of the old rat holes at the same time. We in many ways honored the men, we knew our boundaries, we were on the bar stools, we just left early enough so that they knew we knew the proper protocols.<sup>318</sup>

As a whole, the form of the leather pin sash was, and continues to be, a marker of difference in that it represents the emergence and negotiation of women in nearly-exclusive all-male spaces. The sash was a new format, created in relation (in homage) to the pin vest that was primarily used by gay leathermen in motorcycle clubs – almost the

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<sup>317</sup> Scott (2001), 95.

<sup>318</sup> All quotes in this chapter, unless otherwise noted: Viola Johnson, interview with author, Sept. 4, 2011. The interview was recorded during the Master/slave NorthEast Conference held at the Crowne Plaza Hotel in Silver Springs, MA. The interview came at the end of three days spent researching and occasionally helping out in the Carter/Johnson Library. The interview lasted approximately two hours, and Johnson's pin sash was physically present at the table.

same, but different. This is why, we might assume, she represents the reaction from leathermen to her pin sash as one of skeptical acceptance. The relationship Johnson briefly outlines suggests at once a shared knowledge, and I would add, trust and respect (“they knew we knew”) while at the same time an understanding of the clear limitations that demarcated particularized sex/gender positionality (“we were on the bar stools, we just left early enough...”).

But if this gendered demarcation embittered Johnson, one would never know it. Perhaps because, as she reiterated to me many times in our interview, gay leathermen facilitated her coming-to-consciousness and activated feelings of inclusion and validation regarding her own leather sexuality. Thus exclusion and inclusion sit uncomfortably side-by-side in Johnson’s personal history – and in examining these moments (many of which are unlocked by particular pins in this chapter) the delineations of gender and racial difference within gay and lesbian leather communities becomes much clearer.

The Girl Scouts recognize service, to country and others, as a key component of their Promise. Johnson’s autobiography, *To Love, To Obey, To Serve: Diary of an Old Guard Slave*, which details her experiences as a black lesbian submissive, makes clear that the concept of service, albeit transplanted into the context of leather, is still an important guiding life principle.<sup>319</sup> Indeed, the *Girl Scout Handbook*’s notion of service is descriptive of Johnson’s own mission:

Have you ever thought that service is proof that you are important? It is citizenship in action. Service shows that you have grown up enough to think of someone besides yourself. Service is your way of making a contribution to your

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<sup>319</sup> Viola Johnson, *To Love, to Obey, to Serve: Diary of an Old Guard Slave* (Mystic Rose Books: 1999).

community. Service is being able to help someone else because of the skills you have learned.<sup>320</sup>

In focusing this chapter on Viola Johnson's pin sash, and on the Carter/Johnson library (named after Johnson and her long-term partner Jill Carter) that houses and displays it, I want to spotlight what I consider to be the terms of Johnson's expansive leather sexuality and service – a sexuality that includes the constant upkeep, revising, archiving and presenting of leather history through her own autobiographical lens. Unlike the more formalized Leather Archives and Museum, which would also provide a fascinating case-study on the myriad ways that leather history is being written and presented, Johnson's library and pin sash is less formalized, more improvisatory, and most importantly, more mobile.<sup>321</sup> Many of the over 9,000 books, papers, magazines, posters, clothing, photos and sex toys contained in the Carter/Johnson Library that currently tours gay, lesbian and pansexual leather events across the country are meant to facilitate socializing. Within this rubric, running and displaying her archive becomes an extension of Johnson's mission of service to others – and has the radical potential to reformat the library (whether a collection of books or pins) as a place of un-mastery, of a great re-working and un-working of knowledge. This is, to paraphrase the Girl Scout's handbook one last time, Johnson's particular "contribution to community."

That this library practice is accompanied by a very real and tangible empathy towards anyone who enters her library space is Johnson's particular gift. "Enchanting" is the word that most readily comes to my mind when describing Johnson – many who know her call her "Mama Vi." Johnson, reiterating this kin-relationship, calls many of her

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<sup>320</sup> Girl Scouts..., 85-86.

<sup>321</sup> The Leather Archives & Museum also travels to many of the events that the Carter/Johnson Library does – but the LA&M's set up when travelling is nowhere near as extensive as Johnson's.

protégés “kinklings.” It’s a role she’s happy to take up, and she is currently in the process of refashioning herself into “Grandmom,” solidifying her position as an elder within leather communities. When folks call Johnson “Mama” they collapse two related, yet distinct, operations of caregiving; the interpersonal and therapeutic support that Johnson offers those she comes into contact with and the care she gives to the books, magazines, pins, and objects that enter into the collections of the Carter/Johnson library.

I visited the Carter/Johnson library twice, once in 2007 in Dallas, Texas for the Beyond Vanilla Conference, a regional event affiliated with the National Leather Association, and again in 2011 for the NorthEast Master/slave Conference in Silver Springs, Maryland. These visits were the literal bookends in my four-year research process for this dissertation – and thus this chapter contains some of my earliest (the section on the Mark IV raids) and latest (the section on International Mr. Leather and Ramrod bars) writings in this project. Throughout this chapter I work with and off of an oral/object history I conducted with Johnson on my later visit to the Carter/Johnson library. Portions of our interaction are transcribed and function as keystone moments that unlock potentially interrelated histories. It is by design that this text breaks for extended transcriptions of the oral history I conducted with Johnson, or in one instance, a lengthy public introduction to the library given by Johnson. Johnson’s recollections often interrupt histories already rehearsed and documented by others. Oral transmission, face-to-face contact and archival research, then become the frameworks for writing a history of objects and experiences, and their critical inclusion here is an important model for writing histories. As the hundreds of pins sit alongside each other on her pin sash (a kind of being-with), I want Johnson’s words to run alongside some of the other histories extrapolated here. While my own analysis is present, and in many ways provides a

synthesis of the history-experiments conducted throughout this dissertation, it is not the only voice I consider important. I want to, in short, find a way that Johnson and I can be critically co-present in this chapter. Indeed, at least for me, she has been here all along.

Johnson was key to setting the tone for my overall-experience researching leather communities. Upon first meeting Johnson in Dallas, in the area of the hotel ballroom where the Carter/Johnson library was set up, I received an immense bear-hug from her... not the usual academic greeting! This was immediately followed by the words “I’m so glad you’re here. How can I help you?” At that point in my academic journey I was swinging wildly, on a general fact-finding mission looking for any and all materials related to gay and lesbian leather communities of the 1970s. I felt unworthy of Johnson’s greeting, which I thought would have been more appropriate for a scholar beyond my own meager means. Johnson made me feel welcome, but I was outclassed - literally. I spent what little money I scrounged from my multiple part-time jobs to get up to Dallas (and even then, I was complimented registration/entrance fees for the conference, a kindness facilitated by Johnson herself). The openness and empathy with which I was received was, in short, stunning to me. It remains one of the most powerful research experiences I’ve ever had, and it no doubt continues to affect my relationship with the material in this entire dissertation. So far in *Bound Together* I’ve written about the political power of fucking, vomiting, pissing, sniffing poppers, film-viewing, fisting – but it all really began with another radical kind of contact: a hug.

For Johnson it begins with a book-burning.

## LEARNING FROM NEW JERSEY<sup>322</sup>

The *Girl Scout Handbook* explicitly states that the “quality” of badgework is preferable to the “quantity” of badges obtained.<sup>323</sup> Yet it is the overwhelming number of pins and buttons that impresses an initial viewer of Johnson’s pin sash. The drive to collect evermore pins is fueled by Johnson’s particular experience with libraries, most especially her childhood public library in Roselle, New Jersey. She often describes this place as a “safe space,” a home for social interactions:

When I was a kid, there was a little library in my town. The library in Roselle [New Jersey] was open from nine to nine. Not only was it a wonderful space, but it was a safe space. We literally used to go to the library on Saturday, ride our bikes over at nine in the morning and not come home until well after dark. We all met there. We stayed there. We partied there, as long as the music wasn’t loud, we could have our transistor radio. And if we needed something, a librarian went to get it. I once remember I was in fourth grade in Mrs. Henderson’s class, and I had gone diving into Greek myths. A lot of them are written well over the head of a nine year-old. I asked her for a copy of one of the myths, written so that I could understand it. Three weeks later it was there. It is what I have tried to do with [the C/J Library]... and the intent is to recreate the library of my youth, kinky-style.

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<sup>322</sup> The title of this section is a direct nod to Ann Reynolds’ (my dissertation advisor) work, and is an overt (although admittedly surface and semantic) indication of the various ways her work informs my own – especially in regards to the ways that personal archives can be used to tell alternative histories. While I never directly quote Reynolds, this is an affective relationship just as important as the one I share with Viola Johnson. And so I wish to intersect, ever so slightly, with Reynolds work. Although Robert Smithson thought of New Jersey as an “elsewhere” where he could develop work and his own processes, for Johnson New Jersey was home. Reynolds picks up on Smithson’s use of New Jersey indicate the importance (and specificity) of place – even as an “elsewhere” - in writing histories of art. In many ways, this chapter is an outgrowth of thinking through her writings on place and history, including her 2011 essay on Zoe Leonard’s work for Dia:Beacon and the 1953 Marilyn Monroe film *Niagara*. My re-use of the title of her book is meant to be a wink in Reynolds’ direction, a direct index of my academic lineage, and another intimation of the ways that divergent histories can come to bear on one another. At least in Johnson’s class, the identification with New Jersey is also telling of Johnson’s class position as a young person; living in New York City was more expensive than Roselle, New Jersey. While class was something we didn’t consciously cover in our interview, and this may be an over-generalization, it certainly seems to coincide with an idea of New Jersey as a (classed) elsewhere. Ann Reynolds, *Robert Smithson: Learning from New Jersey and Elsewhere* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2002); Ann Reynolds, “Curving Into a Straight Line,” in *Zoe Leonard: You See I Am Here After All* (New York: Dia Art Foundation, 2011).

<sup>323</sup> Girl Scouts..., 81.

But this gesture of generosity – ask and ye shall receive – is mitigated by another recollection of Johnson’s home library:

**Viola:** History [is] my first love, black poetry [is] my second. So the preservation of history is very important to me, and it went from fact to anecdote because of one teacher that I had in eighth grade who said that history isn’t a collection of dates, but a collection of people. Find out the story, and understand the meaning and the reason, and *then* you will understand history. By the end of that eighth grade year they fired him. He talked about book-burning and the danger of an idea. He made us read, in history class, *Fahrenheit 451*, as eighth graders!

**Andy:** Good for him!

**V:** It was one of the reasons he got fired. He made us think about the power of an idea, and how dangerous it was to have one face. He also talked about wiping out a people by wiping out their history. The little eighth grade student grew up and became a history teacher. I didn’t teach that long, in the public schools anyway.

**A:** How long were you a public school teacher?

**V:** Five years, before I had enough with the system. I just changed classrooms, I guess. I watched that safe space that was my library being defiled on its steps. The library has a huge area right in front where we all hung out in when we wanted fresh air. It’s probably ten by twenty feet, slate with high walls that we would hop up on and sit down. I can’t remember if it was ’69, ’70, or ’71, somewhere in there. There was a historical society that, with the permission of the library, burned *Huck Finn*.

**A:** Why?

**V:** Because of its language. You know, taking it completely out of its historical context.

**A:** Taking it not as a teachable moment, but rather wanting to ignore-?



**V:** Yeah! Taking it out of the fact that for its time it showed an incredibly loving and understanding relationship. But “nigger” was in it. It’s gotta go! Ooooooh! The other one they burned was *Lady Chatterly’s Lover*. And that safe space was defiled.

**A:** So there was a kind of sexual component to what they were doing? *Lady Chatterly’s Lover*, that’s a pretty direct condemnation!

**V:** It was stuff that shouldn’t have been read. Shouldn’t be in a library, let’s destroy it. That safe space got defiled for me. Now, I hadn’t been there in four or five years, but it was the haven of my youth.

**A:** You loved it?

**V:** It was still my haven. A kid may not climb the treehouse of his youth again, but it’s there when, as a troubled adult, he wants to crawl into that safe space and hide. I couldn’t crawl into that safe space anymore.

In this part of our interview Johnson ties ideas of cultural genocide, book-burning and, ultimately the stakes for history through its supposed subject: people – not facts or dates. These ideas are reiterated through the very particular archive of contentious literature Johnson cites – Ray Bradbury’s *Fahrenheit 451*, Mark Twain’s *Huckleberry Finn*, and D.H. Lawrence’s *Lady Chatterly’s Lover*. Each is emblematic for Johnson: Bradbury’s text is an argument for the continuing importance of history rendered through the possibility of history’s traumatic loss; Twain’s representations of blackness, and a particular narrative of an inter-race relationship between the book’s two central characters that Johnson sees as “incredibly loving and understanding”; and Lawrence for the censorship of non-normative, inter-class sexual contact. These instances are bound together through Johnson’s anecdotal retelling of her life from eighth grade to professionalized adult. The social and ideological performance of book-burning, itself a method of erasing knowledge, is the connective throughline. Johnson’s formative

relationship to history, archive-building and books connect the spaces of schoolhouse and public library to concepts of safety, trauma, and history. Most traumatic is the shifting (Johnson calls it “defilement”) of a safe-space.

So I was surprised by what Johnson revealed about the day *Huck Finn* and *Lady Chatterly’s Lover* were burned:

A: Do you still remember that day, sensorially?

V: *I wasn’t there that day.* I was there two days later. There was still evidence of it...

A: Charred?

V: Yeah.

The book burning outside the Roselle public library, an event that Johnson cites as a primary reason for, what she calls elsewhere in our interview her “obsession” with collecting historic material was not directly experienced by Johnson herself. She was a witness not to the event itself, but to its residue, the meanings in the wake of the event.<sup>324</sup> And perhaps in the imaginary space of considering the implications of the book-burnings, of assessing the charred remains, Johnson was able to fully comprehend and appreciate the enormity of loss. Seeing the library two days post-book-burning, and after a “four or five year” absence, deeply affected Johnson. And this is a key lesson she repeated often

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<sup>324</sup> A: How would you describe what it is that fuels you – some people describe it as a drive or as a burn...  
V: Obsession works! [laughs]

throughout our examination of her pin sash and discussions of particular pins: you don't have to be present to let history affect you.

Many of the events commemorated on the pins attached to Johnson's pin sash were not experienced by Johnson, but the pins instead were gifted to her. Her experience of these events is, in short, transmitted second or third-hand – and Johnson is again placed in the role of the removed witness. The traumatic memory of Roselle's book burning is absolutely foundational to the creation of the Carter/Johnson library. Its motto: "Never again landfill, never again flames." This motto Johnson directly correlates to a pin on her sash – an oblong horizontal red and gold pin which simply reads "NEVER" [fig. 7.3]. Collecting, as a practice, is formatted as the recouping of losses, an important counterbalance to the resources lost through landfill or flame. The word "never" is the linguistic signifier of a politics of continual negation, and its implied attendant: preservation or conservation. In being-with trauma, in always being reminded of its particular effects and resonances, Johnson actively works against what she perceives as a possible wholesale erasure.



Figure 7.3: "NEVER" pin, n.d.

But if "never" indicates a negation, the experience of Johnson's own library is one of affirmation. During the three days I spent in the Carter/Johnson Library in 2011 I made a lengthy list of the events that took place there. Gifts were given to Johnson, most commonly books and the occasional magazine. In this process sometimes a trade of

goods or services was negotiated. I witnessed a vesting ceremony in which a slave is formally welcomed and recognized as part of a Master's "family." This particular event had many of the valences of a marriage ceremony – there was a photographer, people invested in the relationship were gathered and stood together, and finally the ceremony ended with a kiss and clapping. Some visitors to the Carter/Johnson library recognized specific texts from their past and were visibly emotional. Johnson gave an especially stirring pep talk to a self-published author: "You don't get to fade away!" and "people need your book." People gathered at reading tables and exchanged info, stories and tips. Several leather authors gave talks and signed books, often gifting Viola Johnson a copy (if she didn't already own one). A couple of pre-planning meetings for conference panels happened around the reading tables. Johnson would often give impromptu history lessons. One particularly memorable lesson centered around an early (1964-1972) Canadian crime-weekly newspaper, *Justice Weekly*, that often covered homosexual scandals in sensationalist language. Johnson's provocative intimation was that the paper was "the first flagging device." Some people remembered the losses of loved ones, and became visibly emotional. Someone began whipping themselves – demonstrating the self-flagellating that was a part of his religious training. Being in the Carter/Johnson library is being in a social safe space – not unlike the way that Johnson describes her home library in Roselle, New Jersey.

The Carter/Johnson Library is also, importantly, a space set up and run by people of color – as all the library assistants, members of Johnson's extended family, folks she calls sons and daughters, are people of color. So the Carter/Johnson library is an important intervention in leather communities whose coded language of Master/slave could serve to marginalize people of color; within Johnson's library, people of color are

the primary stewards of a rich array of historical source material – the very gatekeepers of knowledge. Each library assistant has a named role (i.e. “Robi, *Prince of Pack-n-Load*” or “Pulse, *Technology Jinn*”) and yet everyone does a little of everything. Being that Johnson’s is a mobile library, much of the packing, unpacking and setting up, and space-planning (and off-site digitizing) is performed collaboratively by Johnson and members of her extended family.

The result is the creation of a multi-faceted and multi-functional space, one that affirms the place of women, people of color, and any visitor. The library mines the history of pansexual, gay and lesbian leather communities as well as the affective relationships contemporary leathersmen and women have to these materials. On one point Johnson is unequivocal; she doesn’t call herself a historian, but rather a griot:

We opened the space as we always do, with an evocation to those whose stories we would share, to come and be with us [...] In West African tradition, storyteller/griot is the second most honored person of the tribe. The griot/storyteller is charged with remembering the history of the tribe and sharing those stories with the generations to come.<sup>325</sup>

Johnson and her staff aren’t the only storytellers. While I was at a reading table, going through Johnson’s collection of *Justice Weeklys*, Johnson gave a male conference attendee a tour of the library. Johnson attempted to find out if he could help identify an artist’s work. While turning away from that question, his face suddenly lit up. Picking up a book from the pulp novel section of the library, he exclaimed, “This was my first kinky book!” He then began to relate how, as a young man, he stole a copy of the book he was

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<sup>325</sup> Viola Johnson, “Floating World, A Personal Recollection,” *The Carter/Johnson Leather Library Newsletter* 1, no. 8 (May 2012). Unpaginated. Web. Accessed June 6, 2012.

holding rather than face the stigma of buying it. The man's story was told in an excited yet hushed tone, and, from one instant to the next, he had changed in vocal and physical demeanor. Johnson had multiple copies of the book he was holding, and so she just gave him one.

## YOU'RE WELCOME

*For those who are sitting around this table, welcome to the library. There be a lot of shit in this room. What you're looking at is about 60% of it – there be a whole lot of shit. As your grandmother I get to tell you stories and you're stuck listening.<sup>326</sup>*

*The library. The library started not because of me, but because of about 12 or 13 kinklings in Oklahoma in the 80s. Jill and I came out in 1973. If you are as sick as your secrets, I might as well lay them on the table now because I have three. Yes, I was a debutante. Yes, I did sing in Up with People! And yes, I was the national chairman of youth for Nixon/Agnew. Which should tell you how right-wing I was. I need to give you a reference point for my life now, sitting here. Fade out.*

*Some of you that have read that ridiculous tome To Love, To Obey, To Serve know more about me than you already should know. But to summarize those first seven pages very quickly: the state of New Jersey was willing to give me my master's degree to keep one woman out of the hair of the Dean of Students and the Dean of Women. That was a woman named Jill Carter. Now that you know how straight I was – you get some idea of what Dr. Frankenstein, that yea-tall little black thing [a reference to Carter] changed me into. I became kinky chasing her fantasies, not my own. '73 to '74 I was engaged in her fantasies. We were convinced we were a) going straight to hell and b) we were the only two people in the world doing this, until Jill decided to find out if that was true. Now since we were both teachers, teachers have morals clauses in their contracts, we had to go exploring far enough away so we couldn't conceivably lose our license. Now those of you that know New Jersey geography, we went from East Orange – north Jersey – to south Jersey to find an adult bookstore. In finding that adult bookstore, we found an ad in the back of the paper, and that led us to TES [The Eulenspiegel Society], when Eulenspiegel was just beginning. Our mentors, three wonderful men, two of whom were a couple, one was a man named Jack Jackson,*

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<sup>326</sup> Viola Johnson, "Introduction to the Carter/Johnson Leather Library" (presentation, NorthEast Master/slave Conference. Crowne Plaza Hotel, Silver Springs, MA, Sept. 3, 2011).

*who was TES's only president, took us in. As they had taken in a lot of very young kinklings. The group was only two and a half years old. Those men became our daddies, our teachers and our friends, and the twenty or so people who were sitting in that room – the first meeting we walked into – became our family. Families grow. What we also discovered is that there were a lot of different branches of the family tree, all in New York. And the family tree started coming back together and we started sharing information: books, techniques. Gee, those on the Upper East Side, in the snotty clubs, were coming down to TES. Those on the Lower West Side, were coming off the dock strip and coming to TES. We discovered that the same whip works on both! The blindfold has no gender. We can love together without having sex together. We exchanged that information. We exchanged other information. And good big brothers gave their little sisters something to read. We committed a cardinal sin, and we are going to talk about how each of you are not going to make my mistakes a little later. Sin number one, they gave us lots of stuff to read. And it was hot. And we did what we do with a lot of one-handed reading, which is why we have it. But then we threw it out. Then, Jill got transferred. What happens when you move? You go through your stuff – please remember that word because we are going to come back to it. You go through your stuff, and you cull, you don't need it, you don't want it, you give it away, you throw it out. Stuff! I got to pare it down, I've got to move, this shit's heavy. You will also hear that phrase a lot.*

*So, we pared it down and we moved to California. Jill got transferred. Five years later Jill got transferred again. You cull it down. Only now instead of four or five boxes we had about seven. We got transferred to Oklahoma. Now, Grandma wanted to go almost as much as I want to go over Niagara Falls in a paper bag. Within three days I realized I was wrong. There was an amazing little community. But it was a community rebuilding itself, after the first wave of AIDS. Most of the elders had died. So now it's '87-'88, and Jill and I are 15-17 year leatherwomen. But by the standards we came out in, we were Journeymen, we had passed the apprentice stage, and we were Journeymen in our personal Journey. Because when we came out, a leather generation was seven to ten years. Now a leather generation flips every twelve to eighteen months! At five years you're old and at ten you're a dinosaur, so what the does that make me? But we are now in Oklahoma, and instead of four or five boxes we've got seven or eight. The next generation of kinklings was looking for elders, well so was I. We just moved there, you come, you pay homage to the elders, you join, you work your way up. That's how it's done, but there weren't any. The few elders in the state were in Oklahoma City and we were in Tulsa. As a matter of fact, TULSA, the group that Jill and I still call home, formed three weeks after we got there, we were there for its formation, there weren't any others.*

*Now we had a unique position in the community because we were two women in an all male group. So there were lots and lots of daddies and only two moms. Except for the fact that the kids called Jill daddy behind her back or when she was far enough away so that she couldn't hit back. The kinklings ended up in our living room one weekend a month. And then two weekends a month. And then three weekends a month. And then if I needed to get away from the kids I went to my own barn, but that's a different story. The questions that were coming, because we had already been out about eighteen or twenty years, "Well, mom, you say you knew Tony DeBlase, you know that article he wrote..."*

*"It's in the box."*

*"Well, I remember you talking about doing this workshop with Geoff Mains, do you know where the article is from Urban Aboriginal?"*

*"It's in the box."*

*"Well about the Disciples of de Sade and the Washingto-"*

*"It's in the box."*

*Most of their answers were in the box. Those boxes that we had saved only because we hadn't thrown them out yet, became my kinklings' history. It was just my old stuff. It was their treasures. They gave my stuff meaning. And all of us have told the same story – it's just my old stuff. Who would be interested in my old stuff? It's just my story? Any of this sound familiar? And yet all of you are sitting here looking at me telling just my story. My story isn't unique, it's just longer.*

*I served in California while we were in Oklahoma. Oklahoma had a lot of very rigid postal laws. A whole lot of things could not be mailed into the state of Oklahoma. I ended up mule-ing books, if you understand the term. I would fly to California to see my Mistress, or drive since that was my preference. I always went out with an empty suitcase and came back with ten issues of Drummer, ten issues of The Leather Journal, the newest books, the newest magazines and anything else I could beg, borrow or steal because it couldn't be mailed into Oklahoma. And the boxes of stuff? Kept growing, and growing, and did I mention growing?*



*Stage three of this room you're sitting in: now this is probably familiar. 2000, eBay was still fairly new, and the little town I live in, in Pennsylvania, was one of the first five towns Comcast wired as a test for high-speed internet. They only wired five towns in the US and Willowgrove happened to be one of them – small enough to control. Now for those of you who know me, you can still see the phrase technophobic stamped across my forehead, but I figured out that if I press the button at the right time, things happened faster than they did for everybody else. Fade out.*

*eBay is a wonderful place to be, and before I travelled with this entire library, and that didn't start until 2003, I was doing a workshop called "Leather History: Show and Tell." And grandmom would drag the nice big suitcase full of books and magazines and stuff. I would pass it around and tell stories about it. There was a book that came up for sale, as a matter of fact it's on the back shelf, white cover [points]. It's a book called The History of Sex Lives in England. It is a limited edition, numbered book put out by Falstaff Press, and at some point in time we can have a lecture about the wonderful press houses that printed our stuff in the 20s, 30s and 40s. A whole different story. I wanted the book. I wanted the book for show and tell and I didn't have a whole lot of money. So I figured, fast connection and a good thumb... I can do this! I sniped the nice man who had the high bid for the book, because the high speed internet let me get in a bid at four seconds, there was no way to come back against me. I got it, I did the happy dance. You know, there's a lot to be said for sniping somebody, it's a miserable thing to do, but what the.... The next day I got an email, and I'm thinking "Wow! This is another collector, this is someone who can direct me to other book dealers that are in my price range." Not quite. The upshot of the few emails that we exchanged is that he wanted that limited edition, numbered book printed in 1934... to burn it.*

*Zero to pissed off in speeds that would have surprised Einstein. Mom's collection of stuff turned into mom's obsession. June of that next year, I was down in Atlanta at an event and a young man asked if he could talk to me. Sure, that's what moms do! Of course I was mom at that point and not grandma. He wanted my opinion on whether or not he should close his business, and I'm listening to this as it's going in one ear and out the other. I had no clue. But I listened to his story until I finally caught on. Young man had a little gaming store, forgive me, I don't game, it requires more intelligence than I've got. Some role-playing, some computer games, some Wiccan, New Age, comics – that kind of store – and there had been a book burning in the parking lot where his store was. The hole in the ozone above Willowgrove, is a hole that I left. I was furious in ways I didn't know I could get angry.*

*Part of it, I realize, is because the little town that I am proud to call home, that I grew up in, burned Huck Finn on the steps of the library and they were very proud of that. I don't care what you say, it is wrong to burn a book. It is wrong on levels that Kristallnacht should have taught us and didn't. It is wrong because a society that will burn a book will burn its writer at some point. Because the book isn't dangerous, it's what's in the writer's head that's dangerous. So you've got to get rid of the evidence and the author. I wouldn't wipe my ass with Mein Kampf, but I wouldn't let you burn it either. So you want to burn what? You want to get rid of my kids' history? I don't think so! As I said last night, if I can destroy your history, I can wipe out any traces of who you are. And those that come after you will believe they are sick, they are degenerate and wrong. Not with my children, not with my grandchildren. To do it means that I have betrayed every man and woman that has ever walked before me.*

*But we are all guilty of a sin, and now I want to come back to where I started which is this stuff. The library begins with a story. The story is mine because it is the story I know. It is not that I am bragging about the stuff, what I am showing you is what we all collect. We all collect the pins, we all collect the photos of our friends, we all collect the badges, the stories, the magazines, the newsletters from our clubs, the accolades of our clubs. We all collect this stuff. And now I've got a question about a timeline. You've gone home with the pin, the program, the stuff from this conference. You're excited about it. The pin goes off and goes on the dresser. In about three or four months it goes from the dresser into the jewelry box. About a year from you have a couple of them in the jewelry box and it's getting crowded. So it goes from the jewelry box into a box because you're going to do something with it, you just haven't yet. A couple of years down the road the box is full, the box is really getting in the way, the box goes from wherever it is that's semi-prominent in the closet because you swear you'll get to it. And the stuff sits in the closet until something happens that means you've got to cull it. Whether it be because your partner is saying there's too much stuff and it's running over. Or whether the moving company is saying you've got too much stuff and we have to move you. Or whatever the reason. At some point in time, it's just my old stuff. And you toss it, and you toss it because it's just my old stuff. Who would be interested in my old stuff? It is just my story. Who am I to share my story? But every story is unique to the person who lived it. It has gems in it that are rare, unique and need to be shared. Every coming out story has a little piece in it that may help someone else come out. Every memory is a first because it's yours and there is only one you. Every little bit and piece in this wonderful collection of clans we call a tribe could honestly help someone else. If you think I'm wrong, think about where you are sitting. You are sitting in my old stuff. Reading, loving and learning. Share your stuff, and remember how valuable it is. That old pin is the documentation of not just your life, but of the event.*

*There is a wonderful young scholar who is sitting amongst us who wants to ask me a question about this [picks up pin sash with effort]. Come here, baby [points to a man in crowd] cause this looks a whole lot better on him than it does on me. Not only that, but he's stronger. Do me a favor, take a walk. Not only is he wearing my personal history, he is wearing evidence of the clubs that have called me friend. Clubs that don't exist anymore. He is wearing the personal friendship pins of men and women that have called me friend, many of whom are long since dead. He is the walking living embodiment of those memories, and in just walking around in my old stuff he's doing what the Egyptians did: they said to speak the name of the dead is to let them live again. Every time it's touched, you touch a piece of your past and you share that story just by looking at it. That's what the shared experience is about. If I can give you no little gem other than a whole lot of good reading which is what you're about to do, I need to make you understand the value of your own story. And part of that story is your stuff.*

*I talk about some of the things in this library – yes we have books, magazines, catalogues, posters, programs, newsletters – and I was once asked, “Mom... why?” Ok, the slave of your dreams comes and says “Master I have been at this forty years, I am the consummate slave, I have presented here, here and here.” Really? Hold that thought. Oh I checked the program from LIL 3 [Living in Leather conference], your bio wasn't in it, but I'm sure that was an accident. So then I went and checked the program from the New York Leather Symposium '94, and your bio wasn't in that either. And then I went back and checked the program from the March on Washington and it didn't say anything about you... you wouldn't be lying to me, would you? There's also safety in those programs. You can not only trace the rise of the event, you can trace the presenter. Were you really there in '94 – the program's sitting on the shelf, go check. What was your group doing in 2000? Richmond? Fabulous, there's ten years of Richmond's history on the shelves, all of it. Go check.*

*We don't think about that when we toss it out. We don't think about the history that is in that newsletter, that is in that program, that can be shared with the next generation not just to make them stronger but to make them safe. All of that is in your story and in your stuff. That's what we give the future. The men and women that came before me said that all that I was, all that I was, was the next brick in a very long path. But if they did their job, I had a solid foundation to stand on. And if I do my job, you have a solid foundation to stand on. And if you've done yours, she's safe too. And it just keeps rolling forward.*

*You need an understanding of your past to stand solid in your present. But the present isn't stagnant. It isn't a collection of facts, it is a living, breathing*

*collection of human beings, and the stories make history. Not the cold dates, but the “Why did you do that?” or “What prompted you to take the hit?”*

*One of the things that I point out when I talk about the difference between the fact and the story is the line of the Declaration of Independence. It’s not the “We are standing here and screw the king!” and all that crap. It’s “We pledge our lives, our fortunes and our sacred honor to that thought.” What in god’s name would make a man take that pledge? That’s history. It’s not the date or the place. It’s the life, it is the story, it is the motivation and the reason. That’s what you leave the future in this stuff.*

*Please, as you stand in this room and look around, and enjoy it, and hold it, and jerk off to it, and realize all you are is the next step in a chain... please remember: it is your story that is the foundation built today, tomorrow.*

*Now, I climb gently off my soapbox and say “Go enjoy my old stuff.”*

*Go read the porn!*

## **TUSH**

When one gives or receives a pin there is a protocol to be followed. Johnson schooled me:

**A:** Can you tell me about the tradition of pinning?

**V:** The man who taught me to pin, was a man named Dave\_\_\_\_\_, a wonderful man [...] And he said “If a man gives you a pin you have to return the favor and this is how you do it.” And he said, “One knee goes down and the pin goes through – because any respectable man is wearing button flies – the bottom button, and yes you are going down his pants! You will unbutton them to the bottom button, you will put the pin through the bottom buttonhole, rebutton his pants and kiss that pin. Stand up and request to give him a hug.” That’s what I was taught to do, and that’s what I did until my knees got too old to do it. Now, as a Grandmother I simply say, “Would you do me the honor of wearing my pin?” If there’s a chair available then I’ll sit down and go down his pants, if there’s not I’ll request to put it through the button-hole of his shirt, because I wouldn’t dare put a

pin on leather or through a shirt. But I will put it through the button hole if he will allow it.

Pinning is a reciprocal form of giving (“If a man gives you a pin you have to return the favor”) and is outlined and taught through face-to-face contact. In other kinds of formal ceremonies, knighting for example, it is the recipient who supplicates to the one doing the bestowing. Here, the bestower is placed in the supplicant position – on one knee. The ceremony, as transmitted to Johnson, ends with a kiss on the crotch and a hug.<sup>327</sup>

Pins are ubiquitous in leather communities, a specific form of “visual communication.”<sup>328</sup> Pins developed out of the Motorcycle Clubs of the 1950s whose members would disseminate their own colors – a broad umbrella term including cloth patches, metal pins, banners, emblems and studs.<sup>329</sup> Sometimes these colors would be event-specific, commemorating a specific bike run. Therefore examining one’s pins is also a way to examine one’s own history of contacts, associations and affiliations, “In a crowd of leathermen, one does a certain amount of reading from their vests and jackets.”<sup>330</sup> It is this kind of reading I do in this chapter – although making sense of all of Johnson’s pins would be a herculean task. I’ve chosen only a few.

Johnson, like many leatherfolks, remembers the first pins she gave as her own token, a way of marking that someone had come into significant contact with her. She collected:

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<sup>327</sup> Elsewhere the practice of pinning is followed by a vigorous fuck. Townsend (1972).

<sup>328</sup> Rubin (1994), 301.

<sup>329</sup> Bienvenu, 225.

<sup>330</sup> Bienvenu, 225.

V: [...] some New Jersey state pins.

A: So from the tourist bureaus?

V: Yeah, just blue trimmed in gold. But it kinda sorta became what I could exchange, and my personal pin of sorts.

Sniped from tourist bureaus, Johnson's appropriated New Jersey state pins stood for her person – identifying her with the state of New Jersey, and the state of New Jersey with Johnson. This is not uncommon – for colors, patches or pins, to include or wholly use flags, geographical outlines, or place-emblems. To many examining Johnson's personal pin its meaning would be somewhat generic – indicating New Jersey as a place – but to those who received the pin directly from Johnson, or who knew that the New Jersey state pin was Johnson's personal pin, that particular pin would conjure Johnson specifically.



Figure 7.4: Personal pin of Billy Larkin, c. 1979.

Johnson was not the only person to carry and give out a personal pin – it’s something she learned from someone else. I asked Johnson about one of the smallest and most abstract pins on her sash which was one of the first she was ever given [fig. 7.4]:

**V:** God, somewhere in the [early] 80s, as the group that is now Threshold [...] long before it was Society of Janus South, when it was The Group. I had been given a few pins and had learned to exchange – someone gives you one you exchange one. [...] So Jill [Carter] and I moved to California, and the man that had actually founded The Group was a man named Billy Larkin. Wonderful man, Billy was Bob Hope’s lead writer. He wanted something that would tell the world who he was, without telling the world who he was... he designed this little pin. It is a top, and ... it is a tush.

**A:** It’s a butt! It’s great! It’s a top and bottom.

**V:** ...Unless of course you switch at which point you wear it on its side. He wore it as a tie tack. And I was absolutely enchanted.

Again, the form of the pin – a child’s top – comes to mean one thing to a non-leather viewer, yet in the presence of someone attuned to the language of leather “tops and bottoms” not only can the gestalt of the form be apprehended as a double-entendre on a dominant sexual position, but when flipped upside-down the pin, with its red doubled half-moons becomes a “tush,” a bottom. Relying on the multiplicity of the form’s meanings is exactly how Larkin could wear his personal leather pin to work, in the writing room for Bob Hope, and have his sexuality at once displayed and also occluded to most he encountered.

In my discussions with Viola Johnson, pins would often recall specific people, who were, in turn, tied to specific events, occupations, or organizations.

## AUSTRALIA

A: Is it a New Zealand pin [fig. 7.5]?

V: Australia...

A: I was never great with geography!

V: He ran for IML.

A: Was this the second or third year of IML? And he was supposed to have his motorcycle sent over to him?

V: Yep!

A: I don't have his name on my tongue...

V: They used to make a joke about his size! [laughs] The reason he pinned a woman, I was standing next to Lenny \_\_\_\_\_, and the fact that I'm a lesbian doesn't stop me from admiring beauty. I don't have to sleep with it to want to run my hands all over it. And this little hunk was built like eighteen kinds of gay male fantasies.

A: Oh totally!

V: And while I'm looking at the pecs – which you could've bounced a silver dollar off of – Lenny very casually said, "There's a hell of a Joey in that pouch!" Ok! So, I can't remember if it was before the contest or after the contest or wherever the hell we were, I just walked up to him because I can flirt and it's a compliment and not a come-on. And I said to him, "I've been told that there's a hell of a Joey in that pouch, can I see it?" and he said "Sure." And he dropped his pants.

A: And there was a hell of a Joey in that pouch?



V: And I said, “JESUS CHRIST!” and he said, “uh... it’s big enough for me to blow.” And I went, “I beg your pardon.” And he said, “I can be my own best friend” and I said, “Prove it!” And he did. And then he pinned me.

A: And he did! And then he pinned you! [laughter] so the story ends with... and then he pinned me! [both laugh].



Figure 7.5: Personal pin of Patrick Brooks, c. 1979.

The 1980 International Mr. Leather Contest was the second iteration of the now-famed leather pageant, but it was the first that was truly international. Although the 1979 contest was dubbed “The International Mr. Leather Contest,” all of the twelve contestants were from within the United States, with a third hailing from the host city of Chicago, Illinois. Patrick Brooks, a constant from Sydney, Australia, took home top honors at IML 1980, and his win is shrouded in a fair amount of *sturm und drang*, Johnson’s recollection being the only positive recollection of Brooks I’ve encountered.

The contest was (and continues to be) the brainchild of Chuck Renslow and his (now-deceased) lover/business partner Dom “Etienne” Orejudos. As Renslow recalled in the 2004 retrospective volume, *International Mr. Leather: 25 Years of Champions*:

As I look back, the history of International Mr. Leather reads like the history of the leather community itself, though it was never planned that way. It simply

grew with the community as we all did, and reflected the best of what the leather community had to offer.

In 1979 no one knew that International Mr. Leather would become a phenomenon. I certainly didn't. Together with my then lover and partner, Dom Orejudos, I simply wanted to take a good thing a bit further. We were young, successful entrepreneurs. Our first enterprise, Kris Studios, published Dom's artwork and male physique photographs. We needed models so we opened the Triumph Gym and began sending contestants to physique contests. Our third business logically followed – the Gold Coast Leather Bar.<sup>331</sup>

Indeed, the format of the International Mr. Leather contest was akin to the amateur athletic physique contests that Renslow and Orejudos would send their top bodybuilders to in the late 1960s and 1970s. In these contests, entrants would be tacked with a numbered ribbon and would perform a set series of tasks – not the least of which was to pose for a discerning panel of judges. IML took these salient features of athletic contests and instead applied them to finding the “ideal leatherman.” To do so, the competition had to have a qualified panel of judges. In 1980 there were five: David Beschi, *The Link* (magazine), Sydney, Australia; Robert Dunn, The Quarters (bar), San Francisco; Karl Stewart, *Drummer* (magazine)<sup>332</sup>, Los Angeles; David Kloss, the first winner of IML, San Francisco; and Dom “Etienne” Orejudos, Chicago.

But IML, even in its earliest formations, was more than the competition itself. The event took place over the weekend of May 9<sup>th</sup> - 11<sup>th</sup>, at various venues across the Chicago-land area. In all, the weekend included no fewer than three cocktail/bar

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<sup>331</sup> Chuck Renslow, “Introduction,” in *International Mr. Leather: 25 Years of Champions*, ed. Joseph W. Bean (Chicago, IL: Leather Archives & Museum, 2004), 6.

<sup>332</sup> It is notable that a staffer of *Drummer* judged IML in 1980 as it was the same year that *Drummer's* publisher, John Embry wanted to start his own leather contest. Earlier Embry advertised a mail-in contest for Mr. Drummer, of which the top prize would be “to grace a cover or two as well as a centerfold during the coming year,” with the judging panel consisting of “top photographers in the country.” John Embry, “Have you seen Mr. Drummer?” *Drummer* 3, no. 25 (1978): 68.

receptions, two buffets, the competition, and a “Black and Blue Ball,” spread out over five distinct venues. The contest itself was held at the Radisson Hotel ballroom. At the time, the two-level ballroom was decorated with red-flocked toile wallpaper and crystal chandeliers, resulting in the stirring visual disjunction between leather-clad contestants and their faux-bourgeois surroundings. As I’ve described in previous chapters, leathersmen were often associated with the bar environs they populated – dimly lit, semi-public places. The glittering light of a grand ballroom seems to be at odds with men dressed in leather, dis-placing leather bodies outside of expected architectures. Few photographs were taken during the competition, yet the ones that do exist index this amalgamation. In one **[fig. 7.6]** a bearded man (contestant number seven: Jim Lambert from Touché (bar) in Chicago) is stepping off the runway platform. He wears leather boots, chaps and a vest, complimented by strategically hole-y denim jeans, a Crisco t-shirt and a rolled bandana around his neck. Framing his head is the low-drop of a large crystal chandelier. The leathersman’s dress indicates a working class visuality (the bandana, the product logo t-shirt), whereas the setting implies an upper-class opulence. The photograph is shot from such an angle that the space of the ballroom is collapsed; the chandelier looks as though it could be quite close to the runway. Lambert’s shadow, which looms dark and large due to the photographer’s flash, traverses the back stage and chandelier, effectively flattening out any deep architectural space. Behind Lambert is the stage, swags of dark curtain framed by Etienne’s ten foot painted leathersman standing askance. We also see the crowd, not focused on Lambert’s final moments on-stage, but eagerly anticipating the next contestant. Big Ed, the MC for the contest, stands in shadow holding the metal microphone stand, presumably announcing contestant number eight.



Figure 7.6: Jim Lambert at IML 1980.

The Radisson Hotel wasn't notable only because of its décor. According to Marcus Hernandez, who attended IML 1980 as a reporter for the San Francisco Bay Area Reporter (a gay rag) and in subsequent years became a fixture on the IML judging panel:

Well, it was held down at the Radisson Hotel again for the second year. And ... ah ... that same weekend the National Organization of [sic] Women were having their convention in that hotel! And the place was overrun by women. They were going to have a march that Saturday afternoon. And there were all these leather guys running around with their butts hanging out from their chaps and their leather. It was quite a scene for those women to see all these guys and everybody there [laughs].<sup>333</sup>

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<sup>333</sup> Hernandez, known as “Mr. Marcus”, had already, at this point, had a long and storied career in both the Leather world and the world of United Court system. Marcus Hernandez, Oral History with Jack Rinella, Oct. 9, 1996. Audio. Collection Leather Archives & Museum, Chicago, IL.

During this conference that NOW voted on and then adopted their “Resolution on Lesbian and Gay Rights” which sought to disimbricate issues of “pederasty, pornography, sadomasochism and public sex” from the “Lesbian/Gay rights” that the organization saw as perpetuated “by some gay organizations... who seek to confuse the issue.” This resolution characterized sadomasochism as “an issue of violence, not affectional/sexual preference/orientation” and claimed that to support sadomasochism would “violate the feminist principles on which [NOW] was founded.”<sup>334</sup> While there has been no statement from NOW that directly correlates the 2<sup>nd</sup> IML contest to the passage of this particular resolution, that both the leather contest and a programmatic characterization of sadomasochism as inviolate to the principles of feminism happened within the same hotel on the same weekend in 1980 can perhaps be viewed as a paradigmatic example of being-with.

A color advertisement for the 1980 IML contest features a line-drawing by Etienne of a leather-clad figure standing on the barest intimation of a sidewalk rendered in exaggerated perspective. Orejudos provided almost all of the graphics for IML, including stage decorations of large-scale cut-out versions of his drawn men. This particular figure, with his wide stance, bulging crotch and open leather jacket, is the image that “branded” that year’s contest, appearing on event invitations, judges scoring packets, and as the aforementioned painted set decoration. Although only in its second year, the continuity of such visual branding is indicative of a highly formalized and choreographed event. Even in its first year IML was advertised as a package of multiple

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<sup>334</sup> National Organization for Women [NOW], “Resolution on Lesbian and Gay Rights,” reprinted in *We Are Everywhere: A Historical Sourcebook of Gay and Lesbian Politics*, eds. Mark Blasius and Shane Phelan (New York: Routledge, 1997), 468-469.

events – and offered attendees a \$25 package deal that included entry to the contest as well as a banquet, a brunch, receptions, beer busts, drink tickets to “Chicago’s top bars,” an official contest T-shirt designed by Etienne, a coupon book, and more. With all these ancillary events the weekend hoped to live up to the promise of being “a Leather Mardi Gras, Motorcycle Run, New Year’s Eve and Roman Orgy all rolled into one fantastic weekend.”<sup>335</sup> Initial advertisements for the weekend also touted Tom of Finland as one of the contest’s judges, although, for health reasons Tom of Finland did not actually judge, much less attend, the event. It wasn’t until 1983 that Tom of Finland came to Chicago to judge an IML contest

The program for the 1980 International Mr. Leather contest corroborates the fact that the event was a highly formalized performance; listed in the credits is a stage-manager, at least one personal assistant, a photographer and a slew of producers. Additionally, a dozen businesses are thanked on the back of the program, from popper and lube companies to competing Chicago leather bars such as Touché. The program line-up was no less organized and included a welcome/introduction, three parades of contestants (an introductory pass, swimwear, and leather-levis looks), light entertainment (“Bernie Orlando – Escape Artist”), a two-part fashion show, the awards ceremony, and a closing slideshow. Judging packets from IML 1980 reveal that the contestants were to be judged by three criteria totaling 100 possible points:

- 1.) The Leather Image [0-to-40 points]

- 2.) Physical Appearance [0-to-30 points]

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<sup>335</sup> Bean (2004), 15.

### 3.) Attitude and Personality [0-to-30 points]

In the first category, the contestant will appear in some sort of leather wear; in the second category, he will be seen in a bathing suit or some similar type of attire; for the final category, he will have the opportunity to talk briefly about himself. In this third category, he may, if he wishes, wear a second leather outfit or else appear in the same gear he wore for category #1.

Lest any judge believe that they were merely arbitrators of beauty, the judges handbook issued a strong corrective, listed under the heading “what to look for when judging”:

Keep in mind that what you are looking for is not necessarily the handsomest face or the most muscular body, but rather, the man who best typifies the ideal LEATHERMAN to you; someone whose poise and self-assurance, whose very presence is imbued with that special and unidentifiable quality we recognize as “Leather.”

But the qualities of the “ideal leatherman” were visualized in the repeated image of the leatherman by Etienne found across media throughout the competition. A different image was used the year before for the first IML, and it was one of the only non-Etienne images used to brand IML throughout its history. The stippled drawing, by Robert Uyvari, a Wisconsin-based artist, depicts a leatherman standing atop a globe, his two feet placed on the West and East coasts [fig. 7.7]. The figure’s right hand holds a metal chain that drags lazily and almost key-holes Chicago. While his head is turned to the right of the image, and he looks through his aviator sunglasses off into a distance, his hand points downward to a shirtless mustachioed figure gripping the leatherman’s boot. This figure is one of three similarly outfitted figures. The middle man in the trio reaches up towards the standing figure’s ass.



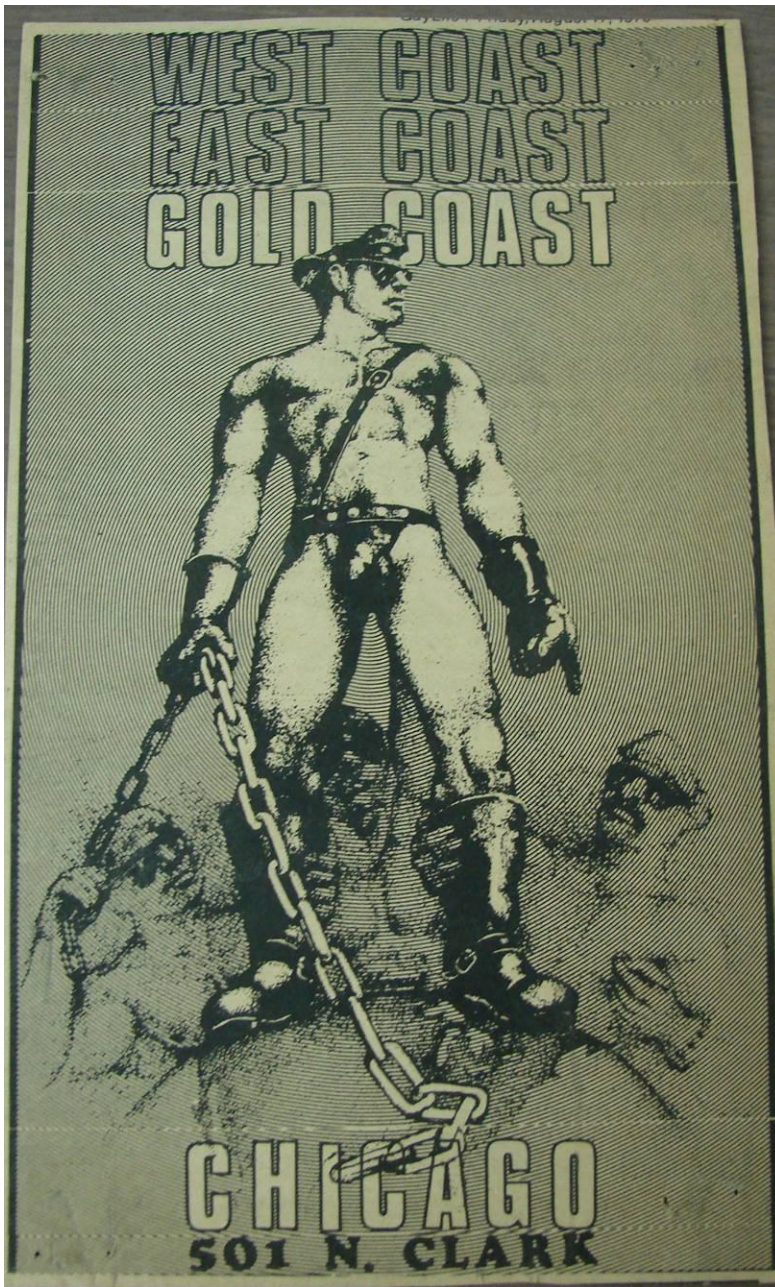


Figure 7.7: Robert Uyvari, poster for Gold Coast, 1979.

The image, made on Etienne's request, also became an advertising poster for The Gold Coast Bar, and in this iteration the image's message becomes even more clear as the poster is outfitted with the text, "West Coast / East Coast / Gold Coast" with "Gold



Coast” highlighted in white block text.<sup>336</sup> Chicago, the Gold Coast, is the center of the leather world, the dominant to the other submissive coasts who can but cling to the boots of greatness. Much of the rhetoric of this kind of geographic topping was built around the nascent IML event.

But on to Patrick Brooks, Australian, who won the IML 1980 title – what of him? And of Johnson’s Australian flag pin? To enter the competition, contestants had to complete a brief form revealing their physical stats and reasons for entering. Brooks answered one of the prompts on his entry form – “What Being International Mr. Leather Means to Me” – with the following:

Leather epitomizes masculinity. I’m a man who likes masculinity in my men and offer the same in return. By being chosen Mr. International Leather it would mean a great compliment showing recognition of my masculinity, it would also show that Australia can match any country in the gay scene. Hopefully this would encourage more Americans to go down under where we can really welcome them. Even if I don’t win I hope it will encourage this migration.

The deep connection that Brooks draws between leather and masculinity is no surprise, nor is the reciprocal masculinities most commonly imagined in leathersex. What is different about Brooks’s response is his inclusion of a brief discussion of Australian geography and “migration.” In short, discussions of geopolitical domination (or here, co-dominance) are metaphorically realized through the outcome of the pageant.<sup>337</sup> Brooks’ bid to win becomes a plea for leather-tourism: “Hopefully this will encourage more Americans to go down under where we can really welcome them.” When Brooks won the

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<sup>336</sup> Bean (2004), 9.

<sup>337</sup> A similar argument is made much more elegantly about the Miss World pageant in Neville Hoad, “World Piece: What the Miss World Pageant Can Teach about Globalization,” *Cultural Critique*, no. 58 (Autumn 2004): 56-81.

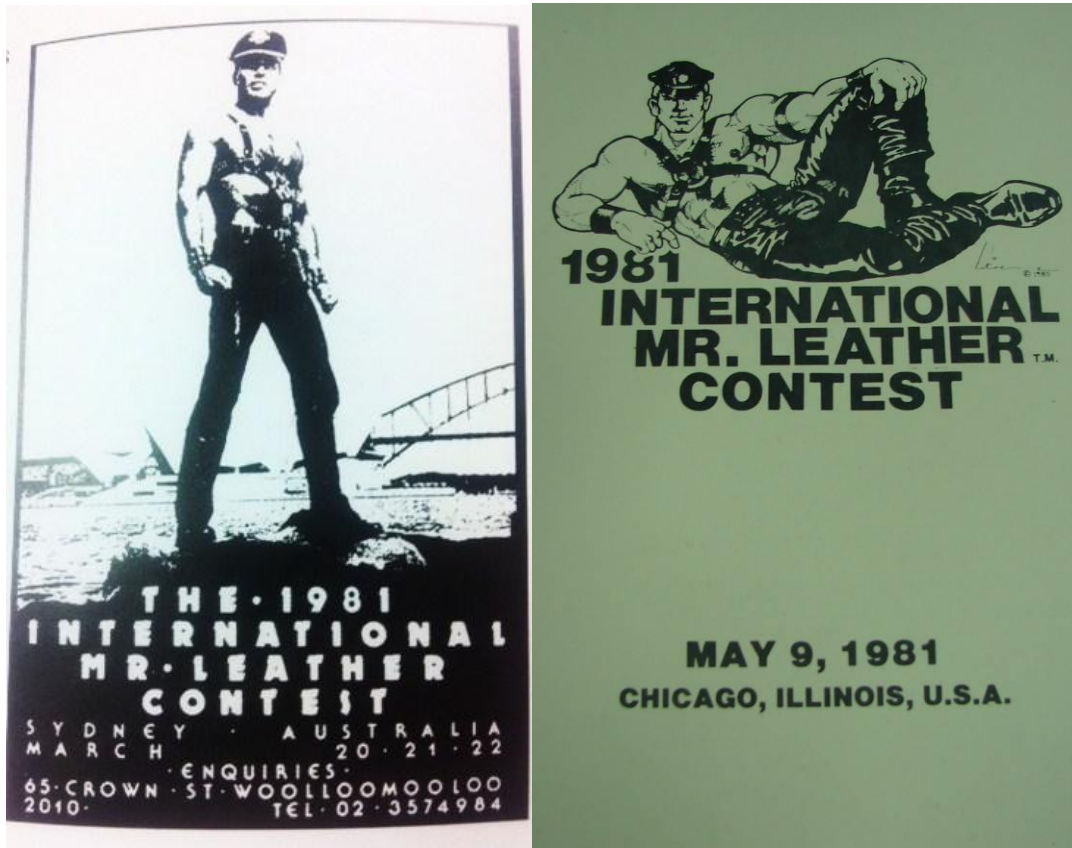
competition, beating out Chicagoan Joseph LoPresti (representing Hardware Liquid Aroma) by six points, it wasn't the migration of people to Australia that was of main concern to IML organizers – it was the new motorcycle that came with first place honors:

If there is a Brooks story that is common currency in IML circles, it is the story of the motorcycle he won. Since his home was about 13,000 miles from Chicago, Renslow offered to arrange for him to pick up a bike in Australia, but Brooks insisted on having the very bike that had been on the stage in Chicago. [...] Renslow had the bike shipped to Australia... by slow boats and trains of course.<sup>338</sup>

There was already a precedent for shipping a winner's motorcycle, as IML 1979 David Kloss's motorcycle was shipped to him in San Francisco. Cementing the valences of self-centeredness and ego that accompany the re-telling of this story, Brooks attempted to hold IML in Sydney, Australia in 1981, operating under the (false) principle that the winner of the previous year obtained hosting rights. Indeed, Brooks tried to coordinate his Australian version of IML a month and a half earlier than the Chicago-based operation. Renslow, ever-protective of his business ventures (and IML was certainly that), worked in coordination with *The Sydney Star* to shut down Brooks's IML and send an Australian representative to the contest in Chicago. The poster for Brooks's IML [fig. 7.8] shows a standing "ideal leatherman" figure, not dissimilar from Uyvari's. He poses atop a rock on the banks of Sydney harbor directly across from Jørn Utzon's iconic opera house, fists clenched and looking out frontally. The poster for IML Chicago 1981 [fig. 7.9] used a 1980 drawing by Etienne which depicted a leatherman in repose, hand comfortably resting on an upright knee. This "ideal leatherman" is confident and relaxed.

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<sup>338</sup> Bean (2004), 21.



Figures 7.8, 7.9: Competing IMLs; Brooks' IML poster (L) and Renslow/Etienne's IML poster (R).

It is within this context that Johnson's reminiscence about Brooks becomes a particularly compelling way of finding complexity in historical power-struggles previously flattened into stories of unchecked ego. We learn a lot about Brooks from Johnson's story (besides that he could blow himself). Johnson, in her openness to appreciating the "eighteen kinds of gay male fantasies" that Brooks embodied also reveals much about cross-gender identification and desire – which she states matter-of-factly and simply, expressing a desire to run her hands "all over it" – "it" being Brooks' body. That Brooks continues to show Johnson how he can self-suck is only further evidence of the participation and interrelation of gay and lesbian leatherfolks in semi-public gatherings – an interrelation that as I've previously mentioned is sometimes

exclusionary of lesbians. In this way IML functioned as a place for “inter-troop interaction,” bringing together men from different geographies, but also facilitating gendered contact between folks like Brooks and Johnson. Thus, it is through Johnson’s experiences that we arrive at a more complicated understanding of the ways that gendered interactions alternated between large-scale gendered expectations in events like IML (which in name and practice, discouraged women from participating) and leather bars, and specific interpersonal interactions. In this case the contact between Brooks and Johnson fostered a mutuality of appreciation, exhibitionism, and sexual expression between an Australian gay leatherman and a New Jersey lesbian leatherwoman.

Johnson’s story also reinforces what I’ve found to be a salient quality within leather communities which is the importance of humor, especially linguistic double-entendre and multiple-meanings (think of Larkin’s top), as a hook around which stories, fetishes and histories can be organized. Here it’s Johnson and her friend’s reference to Brooks’s sizeable cock as a baby Kangaroo. That Brooks pinned her after he performed for her, is a seal of their affective bond as well as the performed event. The Australian flag pin has a cathectic meaning for Johnson, which only becomes available through interfacing with Vi Johnson.

The oral histories and written texts I’ve found do not discuss Patrick Brooks and his 1980 IML win positively, generally referring to the fallout from his win as “unpleasantness.”<sup>339</sup> As Johnson’s pin sash can be evidence of a host of oftentimes conflicting affective relationships, some with the same set of people, so too can the story

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<sup>339</sup> Ibid.

behind a single pin come to counter and complicate accepted histories and characterizations of particular people.

#### **EMANCIPATION WITHOUT LIBERATION**

**A:** Can you talk to me about why you separate pins in this box? Because you're afraid of losing them...?

**V:** Literally, I'm afraid of losing them.

Separate from the dozens of pins displayed on Johnson's pin sash, exists another set of pins, set aside in a small display case containing around fifty pins [fig. 7.10]. Near the bottom right corner of the display box is a crooked black button with white writing that reads, "The L.A.P.D. FREED the Slaves April 10, 1976." The button [fig. 7.11] commemorates a raid conducted by the Los Angeles Police Department on a slave auction held in the leather-friendly Mark IV bathhouse. In 1976 the L.A.P.D. raided the bathhouse during a fundraising slave auction, at which people voluntarily auctioned themselves off to be a slave-for-a-day to the successful bidder. The button is a send-up of local and national news media as well as the Los Angeles Police Department, extolling, tongue firmly in cheek, the L.A.P.D.'s great deed. Like the book-burnings in front of the Roselle Public Library, it is not an event that Johnson was present for, and yet it is one she recognizes as important – too important to be on the pin sash itself. During our interview Johnson reiterated that the events of the Mark IV raid revealed the processes through which leather communities became organized in the face of bogus and egregious actions on the part of law enforcement – and she furthermore indicated that the response to the Mark IV raid was a prototype for subsequent responses mobilized by UK pansexual leather communities in the wake of Operation Spanner, a large-scale bust of

leatherfolks that resulted in the criminalization of sadomasochistic practice under the belief that BDSM causes bodily harm (regardless of consent).



Figure 7.10: Viola Johnson's pin box, on display at NorthEast Master/slave Conference in Silver Springs, Maryland, 2011.

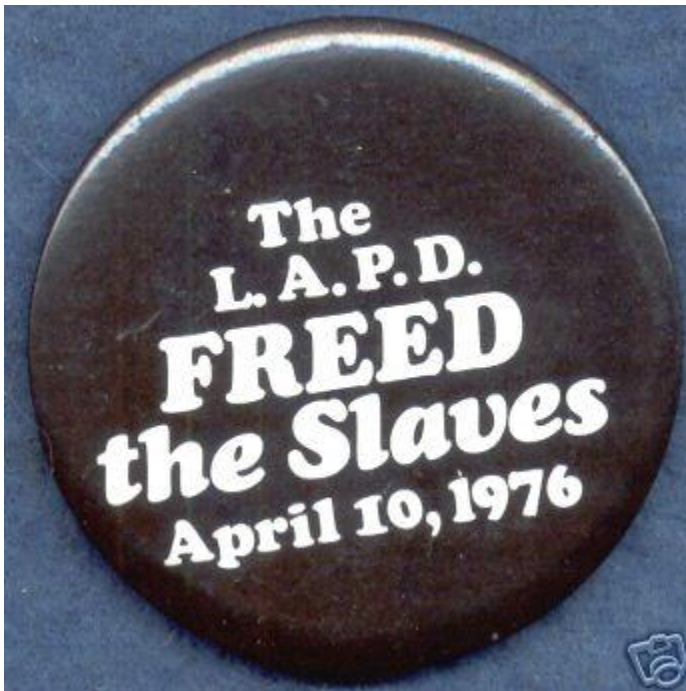


Figure 7.11: "The L.A.P.D. FREED the Slaves" button, 1976.

Community organizers – editors, clergy, parade directors, filmmakers, artists – helped to define the visual terms in which the Mark IV raid would be seen and discussed, thereby situating gay and leather communities within larger municipal and national conversations. Through an analysis of the various contexts in which the objects they used were produced, reproduced and displayed, it is my hope here to unpack the structure and patterns of community formation, response and policing.

Although I have not discussed them thusfar in *Bound Together*, bathhouses were a site of sexual contact, although not necessarily specific to leather communities. The Mark IV was like many other bathhouses in Los Angeles and San Francisco at the time. Because it was a private club, those who entered paid a small fee for a locker and towel. Mark IV housed a sauna and pool area, as well as a few rows of small rooms for

fucking.<sup>340</sup> However, unlike other contemporaneous bathhouses, the Mark IV also maintained a dungeon and provided leather restraints (for an extra fee) to those patrons who required them.<sup>341</sup> This made the Mark IV baths open to the sexual needs of the leather community. The addition of a dungeon and leather props was a savvy business decision on the part of the Mark IV ownership because it effectively increased the potential clientele, including leathermen alongside broader gay and lesbian publics.

Sometimes the Mark IV baths played host to fundraising events for organizations such as the Gay Community Service Center or the Homophile Effort for Legal Protection (H.E.L.P.) Institutions such as H.E.L.P. were necessary because the L.A.P.D., then under the management of Police Chief Ed Davis, were well known for targeting gays and lesbians in public, semi-public, and private settings. A virulently homophobic man, police Chief Davis put forth the idea that gay people could give their gay germs to others, infecting them with homosexuality.<sup>342</sup> In a 1975 letter to the president of the Christopher Street West Parade (akin to today's gay pride events) police chief Davis wrote: "As you no doubt expected, I am declining your invitation to participate in the celebration of 'GAY PRIDE WEEK'... I would much rather celebrate 'GAY CONVERSION

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<sup>340</sup> In one of the continuing great ironies of working on minority and stigmatized sexual populations who, consequently, are under ongoing surveillance, a dispassionate description of the Mark IV comes from the LAPD press release regarding the raid: "Those attending were admitted to the Mark IV by presenting their ticket and being buzzed through two electronically controlled doors. Inside was a complex of rooms. There were 32 small cubicles, each containing a mattress. These locked from the inside, and many were occupied by two nude males. There was a larger room with mattresses on the floor to accommodate groups of men. A jail/dungeon occupied a portion of the premises. It was apparent that this facility was not hastily constructed for this event. It consisted of jaillike [sic] bars and had chains and handcuffs attached to the walls. On the floor was an apparatus commonly known as stocks. It was hinged and contained sufficient holes to contain four ankles, four wrists, and one head." Los Angeles Police Department, [press release] c. April 11, 1976: 1-2.

<sup>341</sup> Ibid.

<sup>342</sup> Susan Fraker with John Barnes, "California: Of Human Bondage," *Newsweek*, April 26, 1976: 35. The same article also cites Davis calling North Hollywood a "cesspool of fruit bars."



WEEK.”<sup>343</sup> Under the tenure of Davis the vice squad (a specialized squad of undercover cops enforcing moral laws) targeted gays, lesbians, leatherfolks, prostitutes and drug dealers. Such behavior earned him the nickname Crazy Ed amongst gay, lesbian and leather communities. Both John Embry and Jeanne Barney, the publisher and editor of *Drummer*, respectively, had extensive experience with groups like H.E.L.P. and gay community service organizations.

In March of 1976 John Embry mailed out tan invitations (none are extant) to the members of *Drummer* magazine’s Leather Fraternity for an event billed as a Slave Auction to be held at the Mark IV Baths, with proceeds going towards the Gay Community Services Center and *Drummer* magazine. Those who wanted to attend the slave auction could detach a coupon and send in their \$5 for an official invitation. According to Barney, the initial response was underwhelming.<sup>344</sup> Perhaps panicking a bit, Embry sent out additional invitations to the rest of his personal mailing list. Unbeknownst to Embry a postal worker on his personal mailing list notified the L.A.P.D. of the event. This began a large L.A.P.D. reconnaissance campaign against *Drummer*’s slave auction. John Embry and Jeanne Barney’s home phone lines were tapped and they were followed during the weeks leading up to the raid.

On the evening of the slave auction the L.A.P.D. officially – according to police testimony - assembled a team of 65 police and vice squad officers to conduct the raid, but many of those present at the raid, and later on, even the police department acknowledged

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<sup>343</sup> E. M. Davis (Chief of Police), letter to Sharon Cornelison (President, Christopher Street West Association), May 23, 1975. in *Christopher Street West Gay Pride Celebration* (program, self-published, 1976).

<sup>344</sup> Jeanne Barney, e-mail message to author, March 2, 2011.

that the count approached closer to 105-108 policemen.<sup>345</sup> The L.A.P.D. set up command posts in a nearby park, on the roof of a neighboring building, and in a van on street level. At least four vice officers roamed inside the event, outfitted with leather gear rented from the costume department of Universal Studios.<sup>346</sup> A briefing of all personnel was held at 6pm on April 10<sup>th</sup> and it was then that the quota of 40-50 arrestees was established. The L.A.P.D. notified local news media of the impending raid and brought along a commercial photographer to document the raid. The raid also included two buses to transport those arrested and two helicopters. That night 40 people were going to be arrested on 19<sup>th</sup> century slavery and prostitution laws, indicating that Davis viewed the performance of a slave auction as a literal slave auction (or at least he believed he could successfully apply these laws in vice prosecutions). Of the initial 40 detained, only four were actually charged with “pandering”: John Embry, Jeanne Barney, Val Martin and Doug Holliday.<sup>347</sup> Jack Fritscher, in a style that pays homage to Gertrude Stein and with a pointed rage that questions the hypocrisy of Davis’ actions within a broader heteronormative culture, rails:

One guy plus one guy always adds up to a couple of three-dollar bills. A slave is a slave is a slave. The word **SLAVE** conjures up visions of The Emancipation Proclamation and the Marquis de Sade. Symbolically, former LA Police Chief Ed Davis, the fascist who would be governor, thinks of slaves by legal, literal definition. Has Ed Davis never knelt in romantic fealty before his wife, adoring her whatever-she-has-to-adore? And would those straights who condemn slavery ever recognize that they are 8-to-5 slaves Monday through Friday, with their wives and kiddies held hostage by their boss who says, ‘You must work overtime every night this week and I know you won’t mind since your kids need the

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<sup>345</sup> “107 Officers Used in Mark IV Raid, Police Papers Reveal,” *NewsWest*, June 25, 1976: 3.

<sup>346</sup> Ibid.

<sup>347</sup> This felony charge eventually leveled against the defendants was connected to prostitution, rather than outdated laws on slavery.

orthodontist and you need me to pay you to pay him and if you don't like it, there's a hundred people outside the door who want your job.'<sup>348</sup>

Because Viola Johnson was not present for the raid, I want to defer to eyewitness testimony from one of those arrested, Val Martin. Martin presided as the emcee over the night's events with Fred Halsted (director of *L.A. Plays Itself*), and remembers the auction this way:

So, that night we started the show and I started selling the slaves. It was about my seventh slave, and I was selling him; a very groovy guy comes to me with a leather jacket and a leather cap, torn jeans, very good looking. And he comes to me and asks what is the price of these slaves, so I told him. I think the first bid was thirty dollars. He asked me if he (the slave) was a good cocksucker; I said "sure" and he said, "Well, I have a big dick, do you think that he can suck my big dick?" So, I said, "Sure, as a matter of fact they call him 'Jaws.' I was just kidding around. The sale went on and on, and the people were bidding more and finally the guy bid the highest and I said, "sold." And then, as soon as I said "sold" and received the money from him, the whole thing comes down.<sup>349</sup>

Entrapment was a common procedure used by vice officers, and it is important to point out that Martin's experience was not singular; often vice officers goaded their targets to break moral codes.<sup>350</sup> Police handcuffed the forty they chose to arrest with nylon handcuffs (then, a new technology intended for riots) and paraded the arrested in front of television and newspaper media (reports from within the leather community tell us that those arrested were chosen on a you, you, and you basis).<sup>351</sup> These men and one woman sat in the police bus while the LAPD went through the baths confiscating leather

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<sup>348</sup> Jack Fritscher, "Men's Bar Scene, Social Notes: Goes to a Slave Auction at the Arena," *Drummer* 3, no. 22 (1978): 75.

<sup>349</sup> Olaf Odegaard, "Knights in Black Leather: Part Two, The Great Slave Auction Bust, An Interview with Val Martin," (unpublished manuscript, Autumn 1984), 2-3.

<sup>350</sup> James Spada, "'I was a Gay Vice Cop'," *Drummer* 2, no. 13 (1977): 6-8.

<sup>351</sup> "Drummer Goes to Boots," *Drummer* 4, no. 27 (1978): 84.

toys and paraphernalia. One AP photograph [fig. 7.12] shows a Los Angeles policeman holding shackles, as though they were foreign to his own profession. In the following days, news stories of the Mark IV raid appeared on the front pages of local and national news outlets. Papers in California, New York, Texas and Idaho all reported on the event. The Orange County Register, well known as a conservative paper sympathetic to the motives of Police Chief Ed Davis' policies and politics, screamed "Police Free Gay 'Slaves'."<sup>352</sup> A month later *Drummer's* headline read "Drummer goes to a Slave Auction" [fig. 3.3]. Johnson's button that reads "The L.A.P.D. Freed the Slaves, April 10, 1976" can be found inside the "o" of "Auction."

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<sup>352</sup> An image of The Register appears in a photo-spread in *Drummer* 1.6 (May/June 1976): 13.



Figure 7.12: AP, an L.A.P.D. officer examines stocks, chains and cuffs at the Mark IV during the raid, 1976.

Inside, an article written by Embry detailed the events of the night.<sup>353</sup> A page of cartoons drew attention and poked fun at incarceration, slavery, and the L.A.P.D. One of these cartoons shows two leathersmen at an MGM Studio auction [fig. 7.13]. The man at the information booth looks nervously at the two leather-clad men and iterates that there are no slaves from Ben-Hur available – they obviously showed up to the wrong auction. Although there are no references to the Mark IV raid in the cartoon, it speaks obliquely to ideas of slavery, and the Hollywood costume departments where L.A.P.D. officers

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<sup>353</sup> John Embry, “Drummer Goes to a Slave Auction,” *Drummer* 1, no. 6 (May/June 1976): 12-14.

outfitted themselves for the raid. In the coming months Drummer would feature more cartoons that referenced the Mark IV raids, caustically reflecting the core issues of police power/brutality coupled with consensual sadomasochistic practice. One depicts a leatherman in his home being raided by two members of the L.A.P.D. He informs them that as they have been keeping files on him, archly pointing to the surveillance tactics of the L.A.P.D., so has he been keeping his own archive. Three uniforms hang in his closet, an L.A.P.D. uniform, a N.Y.P.D. uniform and an S.S. uniform. Besides reflecting a common fetish within leather communities (uniforms of all kinds, including Nazi uniforms) the association of the repressive tactics of the L.A.P.D. with the genocidal behaviors of Nazis is intentional.

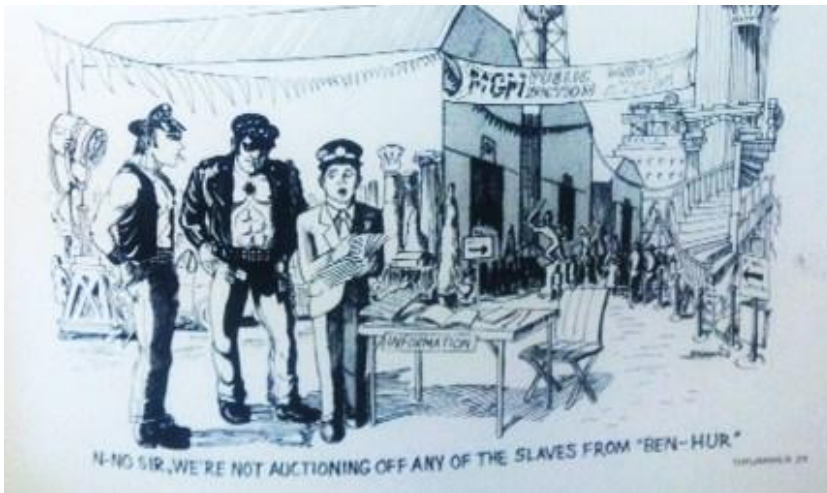


Figure 7.13: Shawn (Sean), "MGM Auction", *Drummer*, no. 6, 1976.

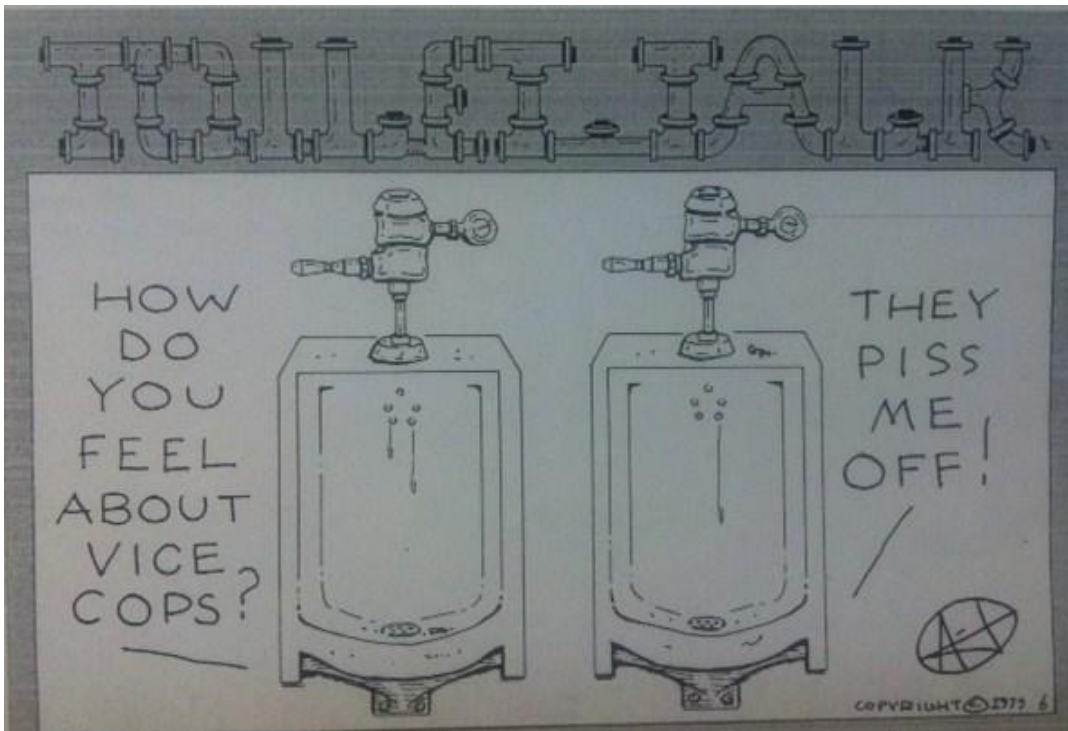


Figure 7.14: A. Jay, "Toilet Talk", *Drummer*, no. 32, 1979.

A final cartoon depicts two urinals in conversation, and suggests the understood nature of the affective relationship between gay, lesbian and leather communities and the L.A.P.D. [fig. 7.14] The pun plays on the double meaning of the word "piss," meaning

both urine and to anger. Anger, here, mobilizes and maintains the leather community. Cartoons and humor played an important role in dealing with the aftermath of the Mark IV raid, pointing to salient differences between the power differentials between a law enforcement agency and sexual minority populations – and the ways in which those differentials are fetishized and transformed within leather sexualities. Disseminated to a *Drummer* readership, the cartoons pointed out cultural misreadings and points of contact with broader gay and lesbian communities.

Some drawings were not meant to be as funny. One by Buckshot (perhaps Sean, again), depicting the raid itself, appears in an information booklet published through *Drummer* to raise funds for those being tried [fig. 7.15]. Leathermen, handcuffed, are shuffled into a bus by police officers. Although they grovel and plead with their captors, the police simply point their guns and smirk. While the frenetic emotional states of those arrested are drawn with empathy (shock, anger, despair, pleading), the police are depersonalized, their eyes largely blocked by the visors of the caps they wear. At the top of the drawing is a copy of the design of Johnson's button, the text underneath the drawing continues the sentence and thereby reveals the intention of the image. It asks the viewer "... so what are you going to do about it?" It is, in short, a call to action.



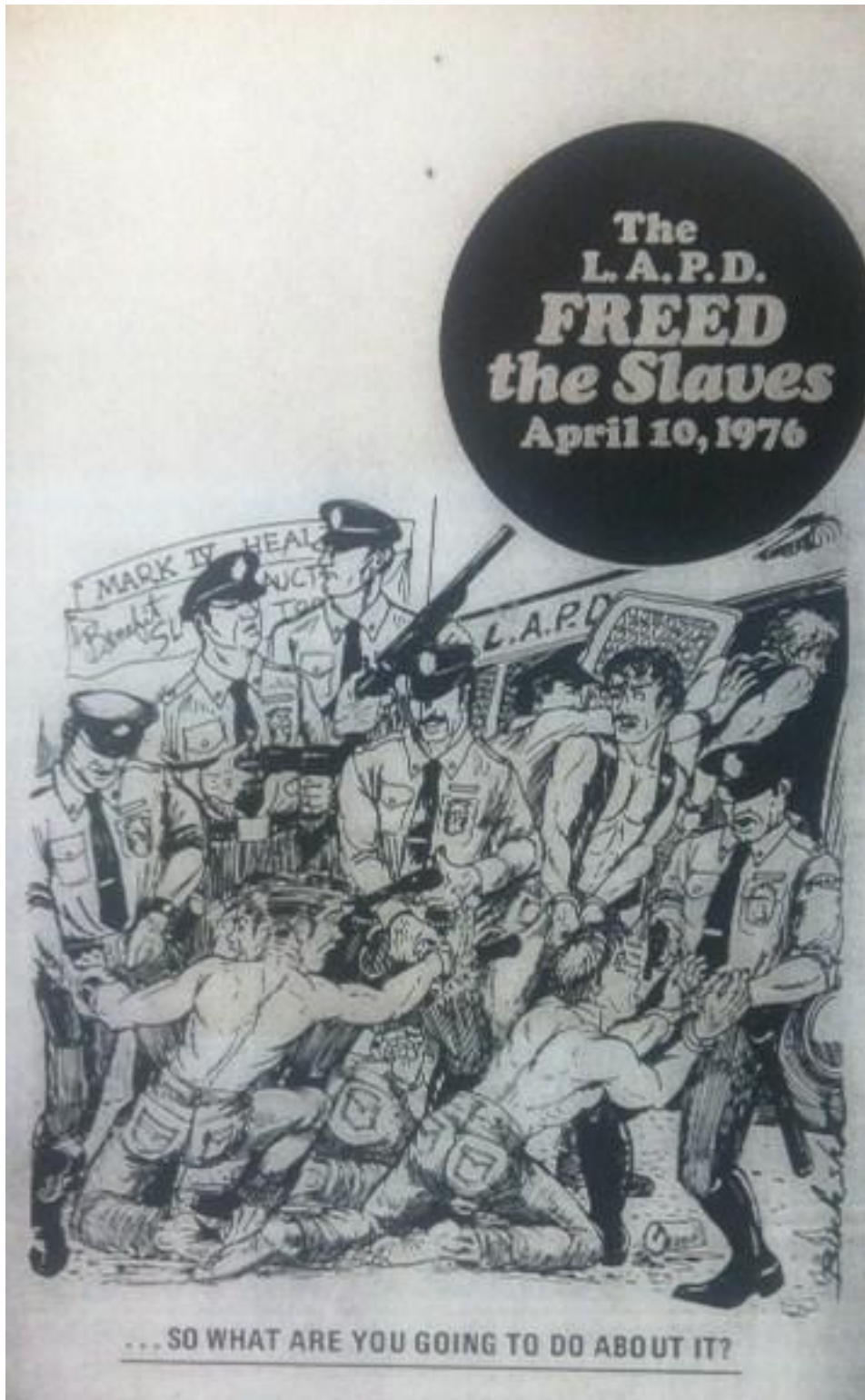


Figure 7.15: Buckshot (Sean?), "...So What Are You Going To Do About It?", 1976.

In the months following the raid *Drummer* published an interview with a gay vice officer and a how-to uniform guide, including locations where L.A.P.D. gear could be purchased. Drummer even sponsored a Mark IV information booklet, which included a cover illustration of a leatherman dragging another by his genitals. The image intends to horrify *and* titillate. Like the cartoon that asks “What are you going to do about it” the image makes itself available for political activation *and* fantasy. Images that serve this kind of meaningful double-duty are endemic to the visual productions of leather communities.

Shortly after the Mark IV raid, the artist Sean, began a strip of cartoons entitled “Cellblock Sex” and published the series as a book a couple years later. The narrative of the strip seems typical prison fantasy material. The kinky trope of uniformed sex existed long before the Mark IV raid, and continued long afterwards, yet the *placement* of Sean’s comic allows gay and lesbian leatherfolks to visually re-imagine, or re-assign the meanings of lived power dynamics – inviting an erotic polysemy. The image of the cop, or here, the prison guard, is re-appropriated and literally stripped down – and becomes, above all, a source of pleasure.

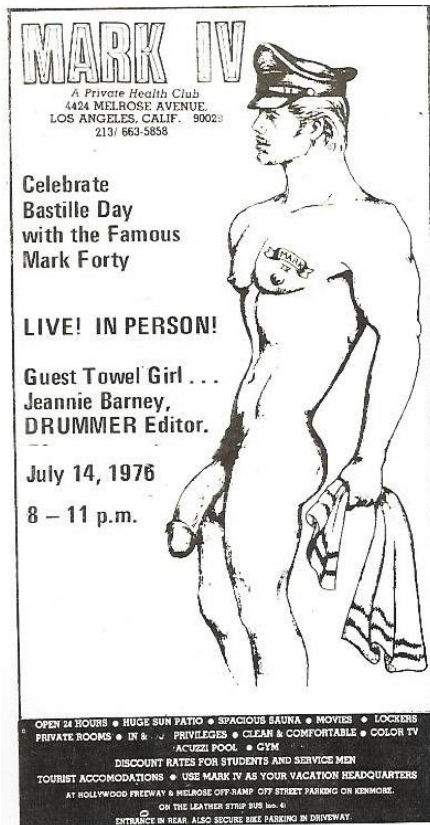


Figure 7.16: Mark IV advertisement, 1976.

Leather and gay and lesbian communities continued to produce a wealth of visual and performative material. Post-raid, the Mark IV hosted a Bastille Day party, with Jeanne Barney making a cameo as a towel girl [fig. 7.16]. In this instance the notoriety of the raid became a marketing ploy, a way to get people into the baths and bars. Those arrested had a certain cachet in leather communities and could easily draw large crowds to participate in fundraising events or parties. Less than two weeks after the Mark IV raid, a second slave auction was held to raise money to pay for the legal fees accrued as a result of the Mark IV raid. Pat Rocco, a film director and photographer as well as a community organizer, emceed the event, along with Sharon Cornelison, president of the Christopher Street West parade. Troupers' Hall, a small venue used for community musicals and revues, hosted the event, which included an opening dance number entitled

“Free the Slaves” and a skit “Crazy Ed Goes to the Baths” (featuring “forty two faggots and a drag queen”).<sup>354</sup> The main event, though, was the Slave Auction. Those involved in the effort to acquit those arrested in the Mark IV raids agreed to be auctioned off. Many of these people were not leathermen, and so were participating in a form of sociality that was unfamiliar as a site of sexual exchange. Al Gordon, chief legal counsel, was auctioned off with a large “slave” sign placed around his neck. Gordon identified with the community only inasmuch as he provided legal counsel, but interestingly puts himself in the position of those who were recently arrested. The Rev. Troy Perry of Metropolitan Community Church hanged an effigy of Ed Davis. Christine Jorgensen, transgender activist, gave a rousing speech and wore a “Free the Slaves” button. Those whose chose to be auctioned off, arrived on stage through a set of prison bars, manned by a leatherwoman in police uniform, making direct reference to the incarceration of those arrested at the Mark IV. Unlike the participants of the initial Mark IV slave auction, many of the people who produced and attended the Trouper’s Hall slave auction were not leather community members.<sup>355</sup> However, they played a vital role in formulating the leather community’s response to the Mark IV raid and their participation represents an alliance (a temporary one, at that) between leather communities and broader gay and lesbian political communities.<sup>356</sup>

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<sup>354</sup> “‘Free the Slaves’ Benefit Show & Dance & Slave Auction,” (event program, April 23, 1976).

<sup>355</sup> The intended crowd was described in one *Drummer* article: “... it [was] private, not open to the ‘tourists,’ the non-leatherpeople. No gigglers, no voyeurs, no strangers and no tickets sold at the door.” Embry (1976), 12. Those who helped to plan the Trouper’s Hall slave auction included: ONE, Inc., Zeta Tau Iota, Christopher Street West, Beth Chayim Chadashim, H.E.L.P., Inc., the Los Angeles Royal Court, Stonewall Democratic Club, The Los Feliz Democratic Club, Gay Liberation Front, ACLE Rights Panel, Lambda Democratic Club, National Gay Consumer Action Council, Feminist Women’s Health Center, and the Hollywood Presbyterian Church, amongst others. Lee Young, “Gay ‘Spirit’ Invoked by Raid, Court Action,” *NewsWest*, April 30, 1976.

<sup>356</sup> This was not an across-the-board response from gay/lesbian political communities – as one column in *Drummer* magazine discusses, “The Gay Rights chapter of the ACLU chose not to support the Mark IV

The L.A.P.D. did not raid this slave auction, partly because in the larger press the L.A.P.D. had already become a source of outrage and ridicule. Letters sent to the editor of *The Los Angeles Times* by Angelinos expressed contempt for the raid and held Davis accountable for the gross waste of time, energy and money (estimated at \$150,000).<sup>357</sup> Some who complained, pointed to the fact that, blocks away from the site of the police raid, an older woman was raped and murdered in her own home. It was one of a series of several then-recent grisly serial murders. Ed Davis defended his actions until the end of his long tenure as police chief.

Seen in this context, the L.A.P.D. Freed the Slaves button provides a falsely jubilant message and one that ultimately indicts the raiders, rather than promotes the raid. Another button (and a t-shirt) was produced at the same time; it was more succinct and read “Free the Slaves,” demanding the L.A.P.D. free those arrested. Produced specifically for the Trouper’s Hall slave auction, the buttons were consistently worn by those present at the Mark IV arraignments and trials. In a situation in which visitors to the court were prevented from talking, the buttons showed visible support for the release of the four persons ultimately tried, thereby structuring a community around the first Mark IV *and* Trouper’s Hall slave auction [fig. 7.17].

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case.” It also condemns *The Advocate*, the direct competitor of *Drummer* publisher John Embry’s mainstream gay magazine, *The Alternate*, for using “the bust to divide and deride.” “In Passing,” *Drummer* 3, no. 20 (1977): 98.

<sup>357</sup> “In Passing,” *Drummer* 2, no. 15 (1977): 82.



Figure 7.17: Val Martin (L) and Jeanne Barney (R) appear at L.A.'s municipal court. Barney wears an "L.A.P.D. Freed The Slaves" button. (photo by G. Roberts) appearing in the *Hollywood Press* 1-11 Jan. 1977: 3.

Buttons like Johnson's were also worn by supporters that year in an impromptu performance at the 1976 Gay Freedom Day Parade. Briefly captured on film by Pat Rocco, two men walk cuffed and chained to two men wearing L.A.P.D. uniforms who are "walking" them down the sidewalk. Every few feet the four performers stop and the two policemen/captors make out. Staged in front of a broader gay and lesbian community, but more importantly, the real L.A.P.D. security forces holding the sidelines and keeping order, the performance is a powerful reformatting of abusive power relationships and

indicates that the L.A.P.D.'s own form of sexual gratification is the unwilling imprisonment of others.

Until now I have avoided using of the terms “emancipate/emancipation” (although it is the subheading for this section), mostly because these terms don’t really surface in the myriad *responses* to the Mark IV raid - excepting Jack Fritscher’s paragraph cited earlier. Emancipate, from the Latin *Emancipare* means “to set free from control; to release from legal, social, or political restraint.”<sup>358</sup> The term emancipation has had many modern incarnations and usages: It refers to the discussion of religious tolerance in the 17<sup>th</sup> century, and becomes identified with the abolition of slavery and the suffragette movement in the 19<sup>th</sup> century. In an American context, emancipate, and the noun iteration, emancipation, are powerful words – young school children are taught the meaning of emancipation when they learn about the Emancipation Proclamation.

So why bring this powerful word into play here? “Operation Emancipation” was the internal code name the L.A.P.D. gave the Mark IV raid. Vice officers at the scene would identify each other through the code-phrase, “Emancipate me.”<sup>359</sup> In other words, the specific language of emancipation doesn’t originate with leather communities. Rather, emancipation, and all the history the word engenders, enters discursively via the L.A.P.D who essentially recast their tactics of targeting and attacking gay, lesbian and leather communities as a benevolent act akin to the freeing of American black slaves, placing the police department in the unquestionably beneficent role of liberators.

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<sup>358</sup> “emancipate, v. 2a.” *OED*, Second edition, 1989, online version June 2012, accessed August 17, 2012

<sup>359</sup> “In Passing,” *Drummer* 1, no. 7 (July 1976): 68; “107 Officers...”, 3.

The term “emancipate” also takes on additional valence when we consider that it appears on (or in this case, near) Viola Johnson’s pin sash. As a person of color, and one who is invested in the terminologies of servitude and slavery – in both leather and black history contexts, the display of the button as a prized possession is laden with potentially conflicting meanings. Johnson privileges its intent to indict wrongful (non-consensual) action on the part of the L.A.P.D., and by doing this Johnson does not necessarily minimize slave auctions as a historical cultural trauma, still largely attached to black identities.<sup>360</sup> Johnson has been a vocal proponent of the ways that terminologies of slavery can be productively negotiated in leather communities, and particularly by people of color in submissive roles. In a column for *Black Leather in Color*, a 1990s magazine produced by and aimed towards leatherfolks of color, Johnson describes her own relationship to the terminology of slavery after describing a sexscene she played out with her white mistress, whereby she was addressed verbally in the context of historic slavery:

When I first tried to write this article I was having a lot of trouble with it. Sure my Mistress and I play with ethnic stereotypes. At times we don’t just play with them, we stomp all over them [...] I started to talk about the incredible S.S. fantasy that [Mistress] Mir and I had played out, and the conversation came to a screeching halt. My friends suddenly turned into the Sex Police. The berating barrage of “How could you actually do that”, [sic] and “You must be kidding”, coupled with “Are you nuts. Don’t you have more pride than that?”, was more than I could take.

I LOST IT!!!

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<sup>360</sup> Weiss.



What about all the other ethnocentric games we play? Even cop and speeder takes on ethnic connotations if the fantasy place is in the south.<sup>361</sup>

Johnson's point here, in part, is that racial/ethnic play is more pervasive than in scenes where extreme race play seems more obvious - through the enactment of the roles of black and white folks within the historical framework of U.S. slavery. Johnson's article is accompanied by a drawing that corroborates and complicates her text [fig. 7.18]. The composition of the drawing is divided down a central meridian. On the left side it is 1855; on the right it is 1995, as indicated by two dates. One date looks like as though it was rendered by quill-pen; the other appears as a digital clock's pattern of pencil-like polygon numbers. In the foreground a black male figure faces outward and a white female figure stands behind him. Both are divided by the 1855/1995 split. On the left side a white mistress holds taut chains that shackle the black man at the collar. The end of her whip is just about to land, or perhaps has just landed, its blow. The black man, branded with a double-R, is weeping, eyes shut in pain, mouth turned-down in a grimace. On the right, the white mistress of slavery-era South is replaced by the white mistress of leathersex, tricked out in a biker cap, form-fitting corset and high-heel boots. The man is equally transformed. Although he still wears a collar indicating servitude, the collar in 1995 is the voluntarily worn leather and metal-studded kind. His eyes open, mouth curled into a grin.

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<sup>361</sup> Viola Johnson, "The Love That Dare Not Speak Its Name: Playing With and Against Racial Stereotypes," *Black Leather in Color* (1994): 8-9



Figure 7.18: Artist unknown, "1855/1995", *Black Leather in Color*, 1994: 9.

A small text balloon gives the rather ambiguous message, "Times, they are a changin'." The message is, we might presume, that what once was non-consensual is now consensual. Yet the drawing could be read in an acidic and ironic way, one directly opposite to the message of Johnson's article – the more things change, the more they stay the same. Indeed, the drawing is open to these meanings. Text and image work to create a dialogue and exchange around a set of boundaries in constant negotiation: indeed, Johnson admits that when she brings up the scene in the context of a gathering of leather people of color she is mostly reprimanded for her style of play.

While the lineaments of the arguments between Johnson and her contemporaries concerns the ways in which the historical traumas of slavery in the United States are internalized (by black and white people alike) and thereby open, or not, to sexplay. The path of the whip seems to indicate an undeniable physical link between past and present.

While the drawing seems to suggest that nothing really transcends this time barrier, a simplistic and diachronic way of rendering history (that was then, this is now), the mistress's whip counters this claim with its curlicue path through the composition. What does it mean that the mistress holds the whip in 1995, and yet that same whip reaches back into 1855 to land the blow? Perhaps current iterations of race play only serve to deepen and re-inflict wounds (physical, psychic) of slavery.

While it may be unsurprising that a magazine dedicated to central concerns and erotic lives of leatherfolks of color would delve so deeply, and ambivalently, into this topic, it is surprising writers from *Drummer* and those who attended the raid are reluctant to address a history of black slavery in the United States. Nevertheless, the traces of these historical precedents can be found quite easily. In the initial reporting on the raid in *Drummer* magazine, John Embry describes notes that the money raised by the slave auction could be funneled to a charity of the slave's choosing, provided "that it be a GAY charity – none of this 'Toys for Tots' shit that the Uncle Toms of the Leather crowd seem to be so fond of."<sup>362</sup> Uncle Tom here is a reference to racist and romanticized white-produced representations of black slaves. Toms were represented as being more interested in supplicating and reiterating white power structures than working against them, a particular typological category which got its name through Harriet Beecher

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<sup>362</sup> Embry (1976), 12.

Stowe's immensely popular *Uncle Tom's Cabin*. Here, racist taxonomy is used to pejoratively call out heteronormative charity practices by gay leathermen (the association of "Toys for Tots"). Still, the program for the Trouper's Hall benefit slave auction was careful to scare-quote slaves and redress the word's meaning: "May we call your attention to the fact that all our 'slaves' are offering their services on a strictly volunteer basis [...] in the spirit of fun."<sup>363</sup> There is a careful negotiation here of the relationship of slavery as a performance practice "in the spirit of fun" in 1976 and older practices of slavery.

It wasn't until 1978, almost two years after the Mark IV raid, that the four persons eventually arrested and tried took a plea-deal, some serving short sentences and paying minimal fines.<sup>364</sup> There may have ultimately been two emancipations here: the first being the false emancipation of gay slaves by the L.A.P.D. The second emancipation occurred, in the minds of the leather community, with the release of the Mark IV four. But perhaps no one was ultimately emancipated. Imbalanced power relationships were sustained among gay, lesbian, and leather publics and the L.A.P.D. – bar raids, busts, and arrests for lewd conduct continued years after the Mark IV raid. Contrary to what the term emancipate suggests, no one gave up their authority. For those attending the Mark IV slave auction, there was no authority to give up in the first place! The L.A.P.D. did not relinquish their authority to arrest and try leatherfolk on vice laws. If anything, the opposite was true; Police Chief Davis became Senator Davis, the distinguished gentleman from California. Leathermen and women were not "set free from control" or "release[d] from legal, social, or political restraint."

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<sup>363</sup> "'Free the Slaves'..." (event program).

<sup>364</sup> The total cost of the Mark IV raids cannot be measured by this final outcome, as it drained the resources of leather and broader gay and lesbian communities, as well as Los Angeles tax-payer dollars.

In Los Angeles, at least, change was slow and painful.

## **RAMRODS**

When writing about the Ramrod bar, the first question has to be: Which one? The Ramrod San Francisco or the Ramrod New York? <sup>365</sup>

Viola Johnson has three buttons/pins from these bars: two on her sash and one in her pin box. Buttons from the Ramrod NY appear on Johnson's sash, while the pin from the Ramrod SF is nestled near the "LAPD Freed the Slaves" button. While both bars share a name (a reason, however superficial, for bringing them together) the two were very different. The Ramrod SF was the first to open, in 1967, and was known primarily for its movie nights, while The Ramrod NY opened in the early 1970s and ultimately is remembered for being the site of two infamous shootings.

Leather Bars are important institutions to examine because, as Robert Bienvenu notes, they were the primary vehicle for transmitting a kind of aesthetics or style through face-to-face contact – and were a space utterly unique to gay leather. <sup>366</sup>

Johnson's Ramrod SF pin is round and made of metal and black enamel **[fig. 7.19]**. The enamel is pooled into the depressions left by the negative space of the raised metal design. "RAMROD" emblazons the top and directly beneath it the number "12" appears, indicating that the pin was produced on the bar's 12<sup>th</sup> anniversary. Bars, clubs and even individuals would sometimes produce several pins – anniversaries provided an

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<sup>365</sup> There were three other Ramrods active in the 1970s and 80s: in Phoenix, Boston and Ft. Lauderdale.

<sup>366</sup> Bienvenu, 273. Bienvenu's dissertation primarily compares what he calls American Fetish (straight) and Gay Leather.

opportunity for celebration and a commemorative pin (hopefully) solidified future remembrance. The Ramrod SF produced a button for their 11<sup>th</sup> anniversary, dated 1978, and so we can date Johnson's pin to 1979. Below the number 12 is a simplified image of the San Francisco bridge's profile, which is not so much a product of the producer's love for geometric design as it is indicative of the technical limitations of the medium. The anniversary button from the year before contains a much more detailed, hand-rendered, image of the bridge. To place the bar, and perhaps the abstracted image of the bridge, the bottom of Johnson's pin reads "San Francisco," the final word conforming to the bottom contour of the pin's geometry. As already discussed, because of its placement in Johnson's pin box, rather than on her sash, this particular pin is especially prized.



Figure 7.19: Ramrod SF pin, c. 1979.

The Ramrod SF, “one of the original leather bars on Folsom Street,” was started in 1967 by George Wilbur, an editor in Hollywood, and Paul Bentley, one of the founders of the *Bay Area Reporter* (a San Francisco gay newspaper) who was also known as

Luscious Lorelei.<sup>367</sup> Gayle Rubin has written that the early leather scene in San Francisco was defined, in part, by the “bipolar importance of Febe’s and the Ramrod.”<sup>368</sup> While the former was geared more towards a biker/motorcycle club crowd, the Ramrod SF was more of an SM bar. One ad for the Ramrod SF, published in the 1970 premiere issue of the largely non-leather publication *California Scene*, makes the Ramrod SF’s salient features clear: “Beer – Hard Stuff – Movies.”<sup>369</sup>

The Ramrod SF was a space made to foster a sense of community; the bar provided a dedicated bulletin space for announcements, housing and the other needs of the bar’s patrons.<sup>370</sup> The bar also ensured that artifacts of leather history were included in the bar’s interior, most particularly photographs of the Tool Box. The latter bar had infamously been profiled in a 1967 *Life* magazine article, one that many leatherfolks acknowledge to be the first popular mention of leather communities and culture.<sup>371</sup> The Toolbox was demolished in 1974, and so that year the owners of the Ramrod plastered photos of the bar, including images of the interior murals by Chuck Arnett, along the back wall of the Ramrod.<sup>372</sup> Ten years into the bar’s life, two years before Johnson’s pin was produced, it was part of the newly Christened “South of Market” scene, which by that time included an astonishing number of bars and leather stores including The Boot

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<sup>367</sup> “The Folsom South of Market Attitude,” *Drummer* 4, no. 37 (1980): 34. Continuing work needs to be done regarding the ways in which leather and drag scenes in San Francisco overlapped, especially in the period between the 1950s and the 1970s. More so than any other locale, these scenes were intertwined.

<sup>368</sup> Rubin (1994), 176. Located between the two bars – geographically and attitudinally, was a bar that eventually went under the moniker No Name which Rubin cites as being a “performance art leather bar which was wildly popular” and welcomed such luminaries as Ron Athey. Rubin (1994), 177.

<sup>369</sup> (advertisement), *California Scene* 1, no. 1 (January 1970): Inside-front cover.

<sup>370</sup> Rubin (1994), 180.

<sup>371</sup> Fritscher (1991).

<sup>372</sup> Rubin (1994), 178.

Camp, Ambush, The Leatherneck, The Trading Post, Bolt, Folsom St. Barracks, Folsom Prison, Hungry Hole and The Slot.<sup>373</sup>

Even though the Ramrod held elder-status amongst the other South of Market bars in San Francisco in the 1970s it was the film programming that the bar was known for. The same 1970 issue of *California Scene* lists on its calendar for January 5<sup>th</sup> (a Monday), “There Must Be a Movie or TV Clip at THE RAMROD Folsom St.” At first these movies and TV clips were shown on film (16mm); eventually they were replaced by VHS technology.<sup>374</sup> Jack Fritscher remembers that on Wednesdays the bar “frequently screened reels from all three of James Dean’s films, as well as Mel Brooks’ ‘Springtime for Hitler’ sequence from *The Producers* (1968).”<sup>375</sup> Elsewhere he recalls that *Kitten with a Whip* (1964) and *Ilsa: She-Wolf of the SS* (1975) would be screened on Tuesday nights.<sup>376</sup> The Ramrod would not only screen entire movies, but clip reels which had been edited together. One such clip reel was comprised of a looped set of introductory segments from the *Loretta Young Show* (1953-1960), a television program which always began with the elegant Young emerging from a set-door wearing a different and extravagant evening gown. Strung together, dozens of these introductions highlight at once the forced generic convention of Young’s entrance, but also the uniqueness of each outfit – an editorial reformatting of the conservative show to suit camp tastes. On Saturdays and Sundays the bar would screen episodes of the original *Star Trek* series.

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<sup>373</sup> In fact, many of these bars, along with the Ramrod and Febe’s, pooled their resources to buy full-page advertisements in *Drummer* magazine – pitching their businesses as part of a coordinated group. *Drummer*, no. 17 (1977).

<sup>374</sup> Jack Fritscher, “James Dean: Magnificent Failure,” in *Gay San Francisco: Eyewitness Drummer Gay San Francisco: Eyewitness Drummer, Vol 1*, ed. Mark Henry (San Francisco, CA: Palm Drive Publishing 2008), 156.

<sup>375</sup> Ibid.

<sup>376</sup> Jack Fritscher, “Bar Queen: Camille O’Grady,” *BARTab*, May 2012, 30.



Incredible here is the heterogeneity of film/TV programming – from popular Hollywood films featuring dreamy matinee idols to science fiction programs such as *Star Trek*, or highly-edited clip reels.<sup>377</sup>

As the bar entered the 1980s it expanded its use of televisual material, while continuing to build a reputation for being a venue where movies/clips were shown. An uncredited 1980 *Drummer* write-up highlighted these points:

The Ramrod is probably most famous, however, for its movies. If you are willing to deal with standing room only in a room full of hot men, you can at no charge see some of Hollywood's finest [...] At all other times, closed circuit gay video tapes will amuse and arouse you. For the convenience of you bikers, the Ramrod also has a second closed circuit video system so you can keep your eye on your machine by remote hook-up. A camera outside is focused on the bike parking area and fed to TV monitors around the bar.<sup>378</sup>

While many bars played films – often replaying *The Wild One* or pornographic films – the Ramrod SF was unique in its ability to mobilize a variety of film programming, and at other times, much-needed surveillance, which was a great part of the bar's longevity in an ever-increasing competitive leather landscape.

Although I have found no direct documentation to back this particular assertion up, it might not be such a great leap to assume that the Ramrod NY took up its moniker because of the success of its West coast predecessor. Opened in the early 70s, the

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<sup>377</sup> There is interesting work to be done in thinking about these in-bar filmic practices alongside Vito Russo's concurrent travelling lecture series on the "celluloid closet," which ultimately became a book-length study of the same title. Russo's papers are housed in the New York Public Library, and they contain not only Russo's own notes tracking his ever-evolving lecture, but filmed examples as well. Unlike the videos and films that played at leather (and gay) bars during this time, Russo's primary focus was the treatment of representations of homosexual characters in cinema history.

<sup>378</sup> "The Folsom South of Market Attitude", 34.

location of the Ramrod NY was directly compared to the South of Market area by Gayle Rubin, “The dock strip was to New York what South of Market was to San Francisco: a concentrated, densely packed site for leather sexuality and sociability from the early 1970s.”<sup>379</sup>

Johnson’s two buttons from the Ramrod NY are visually similar [**figs. 7.20, 7.21**]. Both feature the same logo - the letter “R” placed frontwards and backwards in a mirror image, flanked by two men in cowboy hats leaning against the architectural block letters. Both are enclosed by a graphic circle; in one this is represented as a circle of rope. The visual message is in line with the Leather/Levi dress – mixing leather and Western associations - at that time popular with leathersmen and non-leathersmen alike in New York City. So popular, in fact, that by 1977 Jim Withrow, writing for the NOVA NYC motorcycle club newsletter, complains about the bar:

But the leather boys never even came here [...] a bar reeling in its own popularity. Sun streaming in on aged bodies that once performed the sado-masochistic rituals only at midnight. The gay majority came here for a visit and decided to stay. The gay dollar gone wild. Drawn by the Leather-Western mystique, the crowd has pushed the leather to the periphery.<sup>380</sup>

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<sup>379</sup> Rubin (1994), 128.

<sup>380</sup> Jim Withrow, “The Scene,” NOVA NYC, Inc. [newsletter], July/Aug. 1977: 9.



Figures 7.20, 7.21: Ramrod NY buttons, c. 1975.

It is the same “Leather-Western mystique” represented in Johnson’s buttons. This debate over who frequented places at the Ramrod NY was significant in 1979 when William Friedkin began filming his screen-adaptation of New York Times reporter Gerald Walker’s 1970 novel *Cruising* in and around the Ramrod and other pier bars. Friedkin’s film is an amalgamation of Walker’s novel and a series of unsolved “bag murders” that happened in leather communities in the early 1970s. When Friedkin began filming with his lead actor, Al Pacino, the gay community (perhaps “gay majority”) mobilized to protest the film in numbers, spurred on, in part, by *Village Voice* columnist Arthur Bell who obtained a leaked a copy of Friedkin’s script. As William Friedkin recalls to pornography scholar Linda Williams:

There’s one shot in the movie when you see Pacino walking down a street late at night coming away from one of the clubs, and it’s dead silent. We filmed it at three in the morning, and all you can hear are his footsteps on the street. But at the time we filmed it there were thousands of gay men out of shot shouting ‘Pacino you little faggot! You little cocksucker! You motherfucker!’ And he had to walk down the street as if there was nobody there. He really freaked out during the making of the film. He had no idea what had been unleashed.<sup>381</sup>

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<sup>381</sup> Linda Williams, *The Erotic Thriller in Contemporary Cinema* (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 2005), 136.

While gay and lesbian protestors were barred from shooting locations, they used the sonic power of their voices to disrupt the audio-sync recordings, and at least in Friedkin's recollection above, to psychologically upset the actors.<sup>382</sup> The main complaint of the protestors was that the film depicted homosexuality in ways that pathologized and demonized gay populations. The worry was that *Cruising* would incite more violence towards gay and lesbian communities. Indeed Vito Russo, in his study of representations of gays and lesbians in film history, *The Celluloid Closet*, squares his criticism of *Cruising* on exactly these points.<sup>383</sup> Friedkin used leather bar locations such as The Ramrod, The Mineshaft, The Anvil and The Eagle's Nest for tertiary research and for filming (and was eventually banned from some of them).<sup>384</sup> Friedkin was an interloper in these communities, fascinated in a way that flattened-out the experiences of those within leather communities.<sup>385</sup> Much of the criticism of the film, from protestors and from media sources focused on this:

...the gay community is not wrong to worry that William Friedkin's movie plays like a recruiting poster for an Anita Bryant parade. It is like taking a Hamburg

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<sup>382</sup> Fred Ferretti, "Filming of 'Cruising' Goes More Calmly: Angry Demonstrations 'Very Quiet, Please.'" *New York Times*, Aug. 7, 1979: C7.

<sup>383</sup> Vito Russo, *The Celluloid Closet: Homosexuality in the Movies*, [Revised Ed.] (New York: Harper & Row, 1987). Russo wrote that *Cruising* was a "potentially dangerous film" (189), "deeply homophobic at the conceptual level" (259), and at one point in his text draws a direct connection between protest leaflets, which exclaimed "people will die because of this film," and the killings at the Ramrod, which I discuss later in the chapter (238).

<sup>384</sup> Janet Maslin, "Friedkin Defends his Cruising," *New York Times*, Sept. 18, 1979: C12; Nathan Lee, "Gay Old Time," *Village Voice*, Aug. 28, 2007. In a review published almost thirty years after *Cruising*'s initial theatrical release Lee describes the film thusly: "[...] *Cruising* is a lurid fever dream of popper fumes, color-coded pocket hankies, hardcore disco frottage, and Crisco-coated forearms. Nowadays, when the naughtiest thing you can do in a New York gay club is light a cigarette, it's bracing—and, let's admit, pretty fucking hot—to travel back to a moment when getting your ass plowed in public was as blasé as ordering a Red Bull."

<sup>385</sup> "All of a sudden, I was going to these places and I was fascinated by them," he said. "What struck me was the level of energy, and the total dedication to this fantasy world. It seemed to me to be very exciting. And unusual. And outside my own experience. Whenever a group of people are giving themselves over to something completely, whatever it is, it's of interest to me. Avidity is something that interests me [...]" Maslin, C12.

brothel as the site for an examination of heterosexuality. You don't quite get the full picture of the subject.<sup>386</sup>

The protests, especially those spearheaded by the National Gay Task Force, were covered in alternative news weeklies as well as mainstream dailies such as *The New York Times* and *The Los Angeles Times*. Much of the coverage focused on the specific demands and movements of the protestors and the calculated responses by Friedkin and the film's producer Jerry Weintraub. Few, however, sought out the perspective of folks directly aligned with leather communities who were supposedly being depicted in *Cruising*. Writing for the *Bay Area Reporter* (that newspaper co-founded by an owner of the Ramrod SF) David Ehrenstein surmises that it was *leathermen* who felt that “*activists* were demonizing them as bad for the image of gay liberation.”<sup>387</sup> And it is on this point that William Friedkin is amazingly perceptive as he remarked that the film “scares middle-of-the-road gay activists.”<sup>388</sup> Friedkin may have been right. While many of the naysayers of *Cruising* came from politicized gay organizations, nearly none come from leather communities themselves.

Voices from within leather communities were ambivalent or silent.<sup>389</sup> Such a silence may reveal more about the fraught relationship many leatherfolks had with gay political organizations than it does about Friedkin's film. Leather communities may have also remained silent because, while there are a number of gross miscalculations about leather communities in Friedkin's script, there are also some moments in which Friedkin gets leather communities deliciously right. In one particular scene, Al Pacino, who plays

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<sup>386</sup> Charles Champlin, “Cruising--looking past the images,” *Los Angeles Times*, Feb. 10, 1980: M1.

<sup>387</sup> David Ehrenstein, *Bay Area Reporter* 25, no. 19 (May 11, 1995). Emphasis mine.

<sup>388</sup> Dale Pollock, “Friedkin Film Cruising Into a Storm of Protest,” *Los Angeles Times*, Feb. 4, 1980: G1.

<sup>389</sup> Samois [Newsletter], December 1979: 2.

a New York cop going undercover in leather clubs, arrives at a leather bar dressed in full leatherwear – jacket, chaps, boots. Unbeknownst to him it's cop-night at the bar, and he is summarily thrown out. Had he just come as he truly was, as a cop, he would have been allowed to stay – nightstick and all. Many leathermen were also recruited to be extras in the film – something which Friedkin's studio had to get special dispensation from the Screen Actor's Guild to do.<sup>390</sup> Although some reports claim the extra count to be upwards of 1,600 people, there were at least 500 gay men who were paid \$50 a day, more if they'd appear nude or simulate sex.<sup>391</sup> Indeed, in watching some of the bar scenes, I found myself recognizing some of *Cruising*'s extras from *Drummer* magazine and a variety of leather pornographic films. Far from being just “a cautionary tale for homosexuals, especially those who live in the nether world of leather,” as one critic put it, *Cruising* was an opportunity to get work and be represented in leathers – a covert way to be open about being a leatherman, as the premise could be that one was “just acting.”<sup>392</sup>

Thus *Cruising*, through its use of leatherfolks and leather places such as The Ramrod NY, cannot so easily be dismissed. That, however, didn't stop the film from being universally panned upon its release. Nothing better illustrates this than a movie quiz question written by *New York Times* film critic Vincent Canby:

In ‘Cruising,’ Al Pacino plays a New York cop who goes undercover in search of a vicious killer of homosexuals only to find (a) the killer, (b) that he hates gay

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<sup>390</sup> Screen Actors Guild granted a waiver to the film for recruiting the hundreds of extras because they could not fit the “specialized leather bar look” or “agree to explicit sexual acts.” In another fabulous twist the extras auditioned on West Side pier. Clarke Taylor, “Gay Drama Offscreen in ‘Cruising.’” *Los Angeles Times*, Aug. 19, 1979: N32.

<sup>391</sup> Alexander Wilson, “Friedkin's Cruising, Ghetto Politics, and Gay Sexuality,” *Social Text*, no. 4 (Autumn 1981): 100.

<sup>392</sup> Dale Pollock, “The Gay Reaction to ‘Cruising.’” *Los Angeles Times*, Feb. 4, 1980: G1.

S/M life unless he has the whip, (c) that he is being drawn into the life, (d) that he himself is a psychotic killer, (e) any or all of these.<sup>393</sup>

Considering that in his initial review of *Cruising* Vincent Canby stated that the film was a “muddled melodrama” it’s pretty clear the answer must be (e).<sup>394</sup>

In a final twist, this one more gruesome, two months after the release of *Cruising* “a man armed with an uzi opened fire on patrons of the Ramrod -- a bar prominently featured in the film -- killing two and wounding twelve.”<sup>395</sup> The incident made the front page of the *New York Times*’ “Metropolitan” section.<sup>396</sup> The gunman, Ronald K. Crumpley, was suffering from paranoid delusions regarding homosexuals, namely that he was being pursued by queers who were attempting to “steal his soul” just by looking at him, and who furthermore had the power to magically disappear.<sup>397</sup>

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<sup>393</sup> Vincent Canby, “Film View,” *New York Times*, Feb. 17, 1980: D15.

<sup>394</sup> Vincent Canby, “Pacino Stars in Friedkin’s *Cruising*,” *New York Times*, Feb. 15, 1980: C6.

<sup>395</sup> Ehrenstein.

<sup>396</sup> Josh Barbanel, “Gunman Kills One and Wounds 7 in Village,” *New York Times*, Nov. 20, 1980: B1.

<sup>397</sup> Nina Bernstein, “Man Held for 1980 Killings Outside a Gay Bar Seeks Release From Hospital,” *New York Times*, July 20, 1999: B3.



Figure 7.22: Ramrod NY doors and improvised memorial, *Drummer*, no. 43, 1980.

The two men killed were George Wenz and Vernon Koenig – regulars in the New York leather bar scene. The shooting mobilized the gay and leather communities in a wholly different way than *Cruising* had, resulting in a march and candlelight vigil that was attended by over two thousand people.<sup>398</sup> A photograph taken after the shooting [fig. 7.22] depicts a spray of flowers and candles placed before the front doors of the Ramrod NY, emblazoned with the iconic mirrored “R”s and riddled with bullet holes.

**V:** I got my nose broken in the Ramrod [NY]! Which is something I’m very proud of! You know, I’ve been thrown out of some pretty good bars!

**A:** Will you tell me a little about the Ramrod? Broken Nose?

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<sup>398</sup> “In Passing,” *Drummer*, no. 43 (1980): inside back cover.



**V:** Well one of my best stories... it was fun! It really was! The first time Tom \_\_\_\_\_ and Jerry \_\_\_\_\_ wanted to take us into the Ramrod it was a Sunday afternoon, and there was a bouncer at the door, who was about the size of a small mountain. Now Tom and Jerry were an interesting couple because they were 5'6" and 6'7". Slave was twelve inches plus a [makes raspberry sound] taller than Master. Tom was just a little bit taller than Jill [Carter], and Jill is only 5'4". They figured it was a Sunday afternoon, there weren't that many people in the bar, they were gonna meet some club brothers and introduce the little sisters and blah blah blah. The bouncer pushed Tom and said "You can't come in here with those women." Jerry who was standing behind him "You don't put your hands on my master!" and pushed the bouncer.

**A:** Whoa!

**V:** While he's pushing the bouncer, Tom goes in with Jill. The bouncer, on the other hand, bounces back, takes a swing at Jerry. And it was like a classic almost-slow motion Western barfight.

**A:** Oh no!

**V:** Jerry picks me up, and while I was a whole lot smaller it was no mean feat – I was probably a size 16 – moves me out of the way, ducks a punch. Somebody else doesn't know what's going on – swings one. Somebody else got hit. All I remember is ending up on the bar as a beer bottle hit me right here [points to bridge of her nose]. Blood is streaming down [laughs] and the next thing you know half the bar is in the middle of a fight. Jerry grabs Jill, they go ducking one way. Tom grabs me, we go ducking another way. We're outside, down the street blood is all over my clothes and we're all laughing our asses off! I felt part of my nasal bone slide around my face. We're going just around the corner and we heard shots. And that ...

**A:** That was the night?!! You're kidding!

## **UN-MASTERY**

**A:** Can you tell me about the inside of the Ramrod? What was the inside like? Because as I remember there were also movies projected on the inside of the Ramrod too...

V: There were, but they were in the back room, and we never went farther than the front. I remember going in and around the bar... which was on the left. We never went past that, that was a respect thing.

A: So they played movies in the back room?

V: Yeah. And occasionally women were allowed back there, Annie Sprinkle was back there. Veronica Vera was back there. There were occasions when women were allowed back there.

I want to return now to some of the key concerns I outlined in my introduction, precisely because examining the multiple histories, affective relationships, modes of display/viewing, and geographic locations indicated in Viola Johnsons's pin sash (and on a larger scale, the Carter/Johnson Library) perhaps most cogently illustrates the kinds of histories I call for.

Most importantly, and over and over again, it is the *placement* of Johnson as a leatherwoman, lesbian and black, that Johnson reiterated throughout her storytelling. To be sure, Johnson doesn't overemphasize this point, but the traces of these sometimes commensurate, sometimes incommensurate identities run throughout her oral history. Counter to what Johnson said in her library introduction, the blindfold *does* have a gender, and a negotiation of this fact is complicated. Gayle Rubin (who Johnson calls "a hero") succinctly speaks to this point:

In such spaces [bars], the restrictions that kept out women or unsuitable men were an aspect of the process that rendered them safe, private, and erotically charged. Although some leathersmen do not like women and some are misogynistic, simply

attributing such exclusions of women to misogyny would fail to grasp the complexity of their functions.<sup>399</sup>

For Rubin, the bind is double as she is not just a leatherwoman but also an ethnographer, and so elsewhere Rubin discusses the particular challenges of being a female ethnographer within all-male spaces.<sup>400</sup> And as Johnson indicates, this is not unique to lesbian leather women; she also mentions Veronica Vera and Annie Sprinkle as habitués of leather bars like the Ramrod. In short, the gendered and raced *placement* of Johnson at once leaves some aspects of leather culture unrevealed (for example, the tradition of pinning is usually coupled with fucking) while illuminating others, such as specific relationships with gay leathermen and practices such as slave auctions.<sup>401</sup> This is akin to the radical historicizing work Joan Scott calls for. I have written the histories of events, people, and places that are seemingly unlocked by particular pins in Johnson's collection with varying degrees of attentiveness to Johnson's own story – sometimes supplementing a straight historical narrative, or entirely reformatting it. Yet object (pin sash) and person (Johnson) are mutually informing – creating a dynamic filled with extemporaneous riffing, well-rehearsed stories, and moments of profound silence and amnesia. It seems, then, that Johnson and her sash work in concert. One may be able to easily apprehend and, as Gayle Rubin asserts, read, Johnson through her pin sash. The pin sash, and the myriad pins and buttons which are fastened to it, appear in this chapter as evidence, often countered and/or corroborated by Johnson's own memory (either directly experienced or the inherited/transmitted memories of others). The pin sash is an object with multiple

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<sup>399</sup> Rubin (1994), 174.

<sup>400</sup> Rubin (1994), 175.

<sup>401</sup> Gayle Rubin herself discusses first being introduced to the Ramrod NY, being told where she could and could not go. Furthermore, if she ventured into the back men would start "behaving" better. Rubin (1994), 173.

centers, an organization that reflects the vying and multiple places where leather history is enacted and understood.

Johnson's worldview interrupts an interpretation of leather spaces as harmfully exclusionary – a flat and monolithic view. She interrupts and complicates notions of exclusion when she discusses a particularly prized pin from the Hellfire Club (founded in 1971) and previously discussed in the third chapter. The club's Inferno Runs, which have never admitted female players since their inception in 1976, are a source of desire for Johnson:<sup>402</sup>

**V:** I have petitioned the Chicago Hellfire Club more than once, to enact a very specific fantasy: I don't want to be the first woman to go to Inferno, I want to be the first woman to be thrown out. I want to sit in that bar with a group of men that I love, lift a drink.

**A:** And then have them throw you out?

**V:** And literally have them, very lovingly and gently, throw me out [...] and lift that toast to [...] men I adored.

These were the final lines of our exchange, and as such they poignantly speak to Nancy's ideation of being-with as beyond communion – encompassing exclusion, being-apart as being-a-part.<sup>403</sup> Incredibly, being thrown out is construed as loving and gentle, an engine of eulogizing pride. Attending is not the goal – Johnson is not so presumptuous to reformat the lines or boundaries of communities, but rather she chooses to adhere to them, and in doing so powerfully reiterates and sustains her own position.

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<sup>402</sup> Bienvenu, 250.

<sup>403</sup> This is actually something Johnson and I share – except my fantasy is to be thrown out of the Michigan Womyn's Music Festival. Johnson laughed when I told her that.

I have attempted, then, to move towards histories that are self-reflexive of this process of history-writing, community formation and dissolution. Towards histories that encompasses events we can't remember (like a book-burning in front of a library), but which nonetheless fuel a life's work through their (mal)intentions. Towards histories that speak of fucking and hugging in equal measure; that speak of the importance of not touching. Towards histories that find community in visual work, in the singular, in the plural, in the past, present and futurity of our *placed* experiences. There is no better embodiment I have found for the possibilities of writing these histories than Johnson's pin sash, so heavy and thick with a multitude of histories.

**A:** Can you talk to me about the meanings of community to you?

**V:** That's kind of like asking a meaning of life question!

**A:** It is!

**V:** I have lived, Andy, an amazing life. And I'm the first one to tell you.

**A:** Well there's no fucking doubt.

## Chapter 8: Surrogate Envelope



Figure 8.1: Monica Majoli, *Hanging Rubberman #2*, 2003. Watercolor and gouache on paper, 64 x 51”.

In the Spring 2006 issue of *Corpus* (an HIV/AIDS prevention quarterly) Monica Majoli lays out a narrative tracing the development of her work. She speaks first of her paintings completed in the early and mid-90s, which are visually similar to small 17<sup>th</sup> century Dutch Renaissance oil paintings, but, instead of whitewashed churches or jewel-tone landscapes, the subjects of Majoli's paintings are gay male orgies and piss parties. This series of diminutive works (each one rarely larger than 12") is augmented by the occasional painting of a body part (a wrist, a nape, a pelvis, a chest) in extreme close-up. In 1999 Majoli began creating a new series of watercolor and gouache works on paper. I want to focus on a work from this latter series, *Hanging Rubberman #2* [fig. 8.1] as exemplary of an expansion of the very terms of community through community's collapse into a solitary figure. In doing so, I necessarily consider the two other terms, sex and history, which have served as crucial keywords of negotiation and contention in *Bound Together*. Of *Hanging Rubberman #2* and works in the same series Majoli says this:

In 1999 I began an extensive project depicting men engaged in a fetish, which involves donning multilayered rubber suits. I employed a new medium, watercolor (transparent and opaque, i.e. gouache), as I felt it best described a fluid, disembodied consciousness encased within a confining structure. The rubber suits act as a second skin, while the opaque shapes that surround the men describe both the isolation within the suit and a location or barrier around the men. The highly deliberate subtlety in value and form created by delicate washes, gives a vaporous quality to the figures. The shape around the men becomes symbolic of both a specific space and a void, echoing the men's transparent bodies within their suits. This work has evolved into its current form, which involves life-size figures in rubber, suspended from trees in the woods. Identification either with the hanging masochist or the controlling sadist is immediate due to the large scale of the bodies. The woods, painted in gouache, in which the figures hang are blurred, muted and abstracted to create the muffled perception of the landscape as experienced from inside the rubber suit. The chalkiness of the surrounding landscape in combination with the luminous

transparency of the figures acts as a disjunctive element between exterior and interior dimensions.<sup>404</sup>

While Majoli suggests that her chosen medium is indicative of psychological and perceptual aqueousness, I notice a stronger and more meaningful difference between the pre- and post-1999 work. Namely, since 1999 Majoli has only painted the singular figure. The singular figure has always been a part of Majoli's output, but nested within series which depicted multiple figures. After her switch from oil to watercolor/gouache Majoli hasn't painted more than one figure per composition. In this light, Majoli's rubbermen, whether bound, standing or hanging, can at least partially come to signify the personal and cultural aftereffects of mourning and loss, a sense of solitary survivorship that might be a response to the HIV/AIDS pandemic.

Although HIV/AIDS is never directly mentioned in the artist's statement, the title of her statement, "Identity, Intimacy, Mortality" indicates a post-onset co-presence of these loaded terms. But it is not this particular reading – one that links the AIDS crisis *directly* with the image of *Hanging Rubberman #2* I wish to pursue. Instead, it is the way that the AIDS pandemic may help facilitate a specifically-placed notion of Nancian being-with, and perhaps by extension, community, as contained within, for the first time, the singular figure. What does this singular figure mean within a relational construction of subject, artist, collaborator, writer and social context? Can we write histories of phantasmic singular men, ghosted by Majoli's hand?

Upon first viewing *Hanging Rubberman #2* at the 2006 Whitney Biennial, I misrecognized it from afar as an image of non-consensual torture. Torture was on my

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<sup>404</sup> Monica Majoli, "Identity, Intimacy and Mortality," *Corpus* 4, no. 1 (Spring 2006): 47.



brain in 2006; earlier that year photographs of torture practices at Abu Grahیب were released and disseminated throughout the internet. Even though it was an anachronistic reading of Majoli’s image, it was my initial frame of reference. Upon closer consideration, though, her subject is much closer to a scenario outlined by Larry Townsend in *The Leatherman’s Handbook*, as already discussed in the second chapter, a key text for anyone seeking to understand the practice of leathersex in the 1970s. In a chapter called “Esoterica Exotica” Townsend begins by conjuring scenes of leathersmen hiking and camping in the Sierra forests, making a direct link to what Townsend describes as leather culture’s roots; groups of men in the 1950s who rode on motorcycles outside of city bounds to engage in socializing through and alongside fucking. Soon, in Townsend’s text, which is part instruction manual / part erotic fiction, bodies are “being bound belly-down across a saddle or spread-eagled from the limbs of a towering tree” and are led around the forest with “rawhide leads fastened about their cocks and balls.”<sup>405</sup>

Majoli’s drawing is also strongly reminiscent of a series of photographs taken by David Sparrow for the 24<sup>th</sup> issue of *Drummer*, an issue that has become famous, in part, because the cover color photograph was shot by Robert Mapplethorpe. Sparrow’s photos accompany an essay by then editor-in-chief Jack Fritscher entitled “Bondage: Blest Be The Tie That Binds.”<sup>406</sup> Although the photographs are staged in-studio, rather than in the out-of-doors atmosphere Townsend describes, the similarities between Majoli’s painting and Sparrow’s photographs are striking. One image, a photograph of a hanging and bound figure, is accompanied by a contemporaneous transcription of the definitions of “bondage” and “servitude” from Webster’s New Collegiate Dictionary [**Fig. 8.2**]. The

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<sup>405</sup> Townsend (1994), 193.

<sup>406</sup> Jack Fritscher, “Bondage: Blest Be The Tie That Binds,” *Drummer* 3, no. 24 (1978d): 16-23, 76.



a multitude of straps; a caribeenner helps hold the upper back, neck and head. The edge of the figure's profile is puckered, indicating a stretched seam of a latex hood. The figure is handcuffed. Chains criss-cross and connect to the backs of boot-bound feet; these chains serve the double function of suspending the figure's weight and drawing the limbs towards one another, effectively hog-tying the man in mid-air while leaving the front of his body extended and vulnerable. The man's balls are stretched uncomfortably away from his body by chains, and they support a series of three graduated weights. The background, while "blurred, muted and abstracted" still retains the faintest trace of verticality, with dark tones creating irregular columns, patchy like birch, that sometimes stretch the length of the paper and sometimes dissolve before reaching either the bottom or top of the composition. These, we might assume, are trees.

Majoli's composition is reminiscent of Sparrow's photograph; hooded and bound in leather, the figure hangs from a set of chains, hog-tied in much the same manner. The figure in Sparrow's photograph is isolated as well, with only the faintest hint of a shadow resulting from the photographer's flash.

Even though works such as *Hanging Rubberman #2* seem to be about the singular and solitary figure, logic allows us to deduce that at least one other body is implicated in the intricacies of binding a hanging figure. In her statement, Majoli asks the viewer to identify with either the present masochist, or the absent sadist – implying more than one figure. The absence of the sadist is important as it leaves the power relationship open to multiple interpretations and (mis)readings. The hanging body is in a state of being-with while at the same time being-alone, and thus fulfills the minimum requirements for Nancian subjectivity and community. Nancy defines the singular as:

...not a 'subject' in the sense of the relation of a self to itself [as in Descartes, but...] is an 'ipseity' that is not the relation of a 'me' to 'itself.' It is neither 'me' nor 'you'; it is *what is distinguished* in the distinction, what is discreet in the discretion. It is being-a-part of Being itself and in Being itself, Being in each instant [*au coup par coup*], which attests to the fact that Being only takes place in each instant.<sup>408</sup>

The manner in which the bodies, both present and absent, in Majoli's works are imagined, enframed by the practice of spuspension, specifically, and leathersex more broadly, speaks to the way in which the singular subject is produced and understood – instant for instant. Majoli presents a layered representation of sex. The absent sadist could metaphorically stand for many things: the distant daddy, the dead lover, the dictatorial despot, repressive social and cultural systems. In many ways the specifics of this relationship doesn't matter, rather what is important and politically expedient is the fact that the figure cannot be unbound by an other we can easily see or understand. If we, as viewers, admit we are directly implicated, the question then becomes whether to unbind, untie and thus physically and metaphorically bring down this figure, deny his particular brand of sexual liberation.

Pleasure is at stake here (even anxiety as a fucked-up kind of pleasure), but so are the terms under which liberation occurs – binding a figure so tightly running counter to the vast, expansive wilderness in which the figure is placed. Thus *Hanging Rubberman* #2, far from being an indictment against leathersex, might actuality be an argument for how leathersex could echo the conditions of being itself. This figure's consciousness is constituted through tight restriction, within a loosely defined environment. This is as true for *Hanging Rubberman* #2's potential to signal within discussions of liberation. The

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<sup>408</sup> Nancy (2000), 32-3.

figure in *Hanging Rubberman #2* stands (swings?) at once in conjunction with liberationist ideologies and apart from them. In conjunction because it represents dichotomous positions that are so much a part of the language of liberationist strategies – Sadist/Masochist, Absent/Present, Liberated/Bound, Exterior/Interior – and apart because these positions are allowed to be copresent without an overt valuation of one over or against the other. While Larry Townsend's text provides an early prototype for the act represented in *Hanging Rubberman #2*, Majoli's visual source material is, in fact, more contemporaneous with the moment she conceptualized her series of rubbermen.



Figure 8.3: Monica Majoli, *Untitled*, 1990. Oil on panel, 12 x 12".

It may be helpful here to turn to Majoli's history, and subsequent artistic process, in creating images of non-normative sex to better illustrate why I want to position a work like *Hanging Rubberman #2* as a radical way of intimating community, sex and history. Of her earlier work in oils Majoli has written [Fig. 8.3]:

The male sex scenes began when a close friend of mine started to go to underground piss parties and became increasingly involved with S/M sex. I had always been fascinated by his anonymous encounters with men. I envied the nonverbal quality and the absolute sexual abandon of his experiences. AIDS confused all this - and I began to wonder about this decision to pursue this despite the consequences.<sup>409</sup>

This friend of Majoli's, Peter, had been diagnosed with HIV at the time Majoli started painting the aforementioned orgy and piss party paintings, and so the kinds of personal information Peter divulged was distressing not only to the artist but to other mutual friends. Working within the affective state of distress, Majoli's response to her friend's stories was to create works "documenting" both the information of the event and the man relating the information in a non-judgmental way:

The impetus behind doing those paintings was that I felt he wouldn't be alive. I really thought he might be gone in a year's time, I had no idea. Part of the reason was to memorialize him. It seems an odd thing to memorialize someone in this way.<sup>410</sup>

To read these tiny oil works like *Untitled* (1990), intimately personal in scale, as memorials *and* as documents is to at once acknowledge Peter's impending death and Majoli's sense of future survivorship – bringing the question of future loss into the

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<sup>409</sup> Monica Majoli, "Letter to Florence," *Air de Paris*, Web. Accessed Aug. 17, 2012.

<sup>410</sup> Monica Majoli, interview with author, Nov. 17, 2009.

immediate present. To memorialize Peter as she does in *Untitled* (1990) (he's the blond being pissed on), is to acknowledge and deeply validate the ways in which Peter found pleasure. Her artistic collaboration with Peter continued to grow, as Majoli asked Peter to pose, taking photos of him reenacting the stories he told. These photos served as visual referents in the making of the meticulous oil-on-panel works. Thus we might read these paintings as thrice mediated documents, and representing a re-telling (Peter relating), a re-staging (Majoli posing Peter) and a re-reading (Majoli painting) of personal experience. Majoli's history paintings are as indexical of her process as they are of the original story told. Additionally, Peter's stories of group sex eventually served as a way for Majoli to first imagine and then realize her own sexuality. While creating *Untitled* (1991) [fig. 8.4] Majoli came to the realization that her friend Peter was in fact "a surrogate" for her own identification with the masochist's position.<sup>411</sup>

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<sup>411</sup> One of the most interesting aspects of this painting is that it geographically places the figures outside of the home as well – and represents a literal window or point of transition between exclusively indoor and exclusively outdoor works. Through the window you can discern the hills of L.A., palm trees and all.

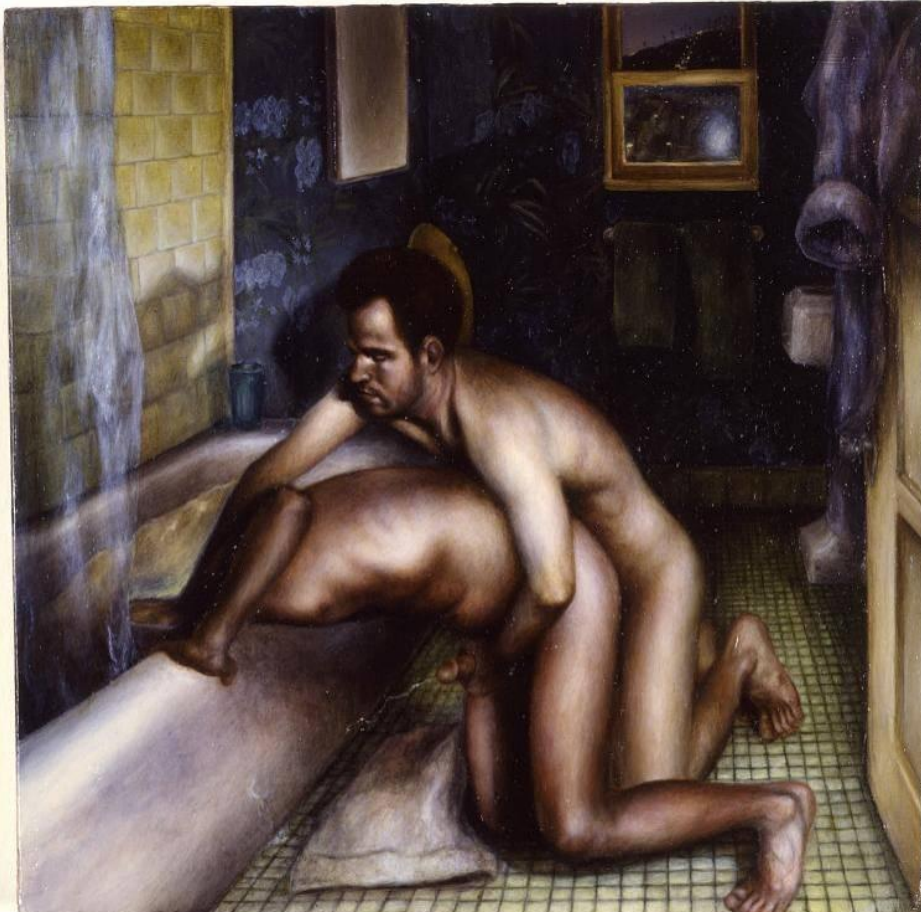


Figure 8.4: Monica Majoli, *Untitled*, 1991. Oil on panel, 12 x 12”.

It is at this point that Majoli stopped directly imagining Peter’s experience and started to produce more overtly autobiographical works, painting herself in sexual positions with lovers and, more often, by herself. The largest of these works, *Untitled* (1996-1998) [fig. 8.5], took three years to complete. It is, moreover, a signal of their continued collaboration and deep affective bond that Majoli asked Peter to snap the study photographs for these works, thus reversing the artist/subject position for a brief period of time. In the process of making these works Majoli again embedded and memorialized Peter, giving him the privileged position of artist’s assistant and initial viewer.



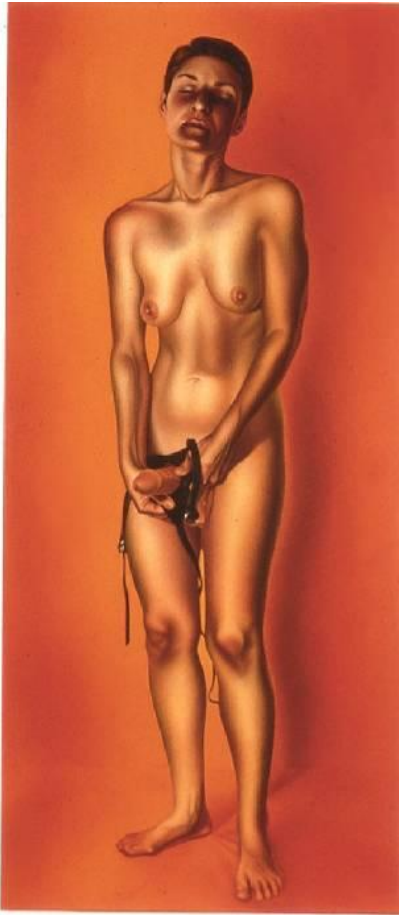


Figure 8.5: Monica Majoli, *Untitled*, 1996-1998. Oil on panel, 68 x 29-1/2”.

Like *Hanging Rubberman #2* Majoli suggests the presence of a fantasized other in *Untitled* (1996-1998) insofar as the figure is interiorly-focused (eyes closed) but externally equipped with a strap-on dildo to penetrate an absent partner. These works marked a transitional period in Majoli’s output and catalyzed her current concentration on single-figure works. The critic Michael Duncan describes the figure of the artist in these transitional works as being cast into a “febrile state that seems part ecstasy, part guilt-ridden hell.”<sup>412</sup> Such deep ambivalence could be read across Majoli’s career – as the earlier scenes are at once an empathetic validation of a particular non-normative sexual

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<sup>412</sup> Michael Duncan, “L.A. Portraiture: Post-Cool,” *Art in America* 87, no. 10 (1999): 127.

event and a pre-emptive memorial to a dead friend, who, despite Majoli's positioning of the small paintings as memorials, still continues to live to this day. Similarly the figure in *Hanging Rubberman #2* can be read ambivalently as at once completely free and also utterly bound/dependant. These ambivalences are reinforced in the technical completion of the work, Majoli's careful rendering and hard-outlining of the figure and the amorphous lighting schema signaling both the aqueous and the solid.

All of Majoli's images are dependent upon an inferred, but absent community. In other words, her figures are always in a state of being-with, and quite possibly never truly alone even when bound and hung. Like the oil paintings before them, Majoli chose to collaborate with a member of gay male BDSM communities to begin her then-new series of watercolors. After looking through a copy of *Rubber Rebel* magazine Majoli contacted a member of the editorial staff, Peter Tolos, also known as Rubber Bear. After talking with Rubber Bear, Majoli purchased a bundle of photographs, both published and unpublished, to begin working with as primary source material. At least one of the resulting works *Rubberman (#12 of 15) (2000-2001)* [fig. 8.6], although not a direct translation of a specific photograph, represents Rubber Bear. Unlike her collaboration with Peter, in which her co-collaborator was able to see and comment on the work produced, Rubber Bear passed away of a heart attack in 1999 before Majoli could contact him again. And so the Rubberman series are (inadvertent) memorials to the dead, whereas the earlier oil paintings are (for now) meditations on survivorship.



Figure 8.6: Monica Majoli, *Rubberman* (#12 of 15), 2000-2001. Suite of 15: watercolor and gouache on paper in artist designated frame, 10 x 14”.

Conceptualizing Majoli’s artistic trajectory as a kind of bifurcated narrative (work in oil vs. work in watercolor) describes and fails to describe the interpolation between the two bodies of work. Throwing these bifurcations out leaves out a linear narrative, but I think speaks more to the nature of Majoli’s work, which often double-backs on itself. Images of anonymous others are in fact surrogates for the artist’s self, just as the images of the artist’s self can be surrogates for a viewer – for me. *Hanging Rubberman* #2, like the earlier work which represents Peter participating in piss orgies, makes a claim for the viewer (and artist) to identify with the masochist. It therefore surmises or assumes a community while only figuring one body and forces a definition-changing question of community which is: can one person constitute a community? The answer here must be yes; as even if there is no sadist outside the frame, there is the viewer, you, me, us, and we actively provide and negotiate meaning around the hanging subject. This is an easy

and unsurprising way of formulating relationality – as there is always the work and the viewer – harder still is to formulate this kind of being-with in the singular figure. The rubber gear may provide an apt metaphor for attempting such a reading as rubber, like leather, is often referred to in leather communities as a second skin. The two skins, belonging to the singular body, speak of a multiplied existence with multiple corporeal limits/boundaries. The singularity can exist both inside the second skin and outside of it, externalizing while remaining internal as in *Rubberman* (#6 of 15) (2000-2001) [fig. 8.7]. Here the figure's rubber suit is sluiced off of the body, arms draping backwards almost seeming like a second pair of legs. The masturbating protagonist looks downward, and not out towards a viewer/voyeur. He is singular and plural. Such an imagining of community is not jubilant, but rather a dull fact of existence, a necessary structure of viewing art, and a realization that is perhaps as numbing as the monotonous color palette utilized by Majoli.

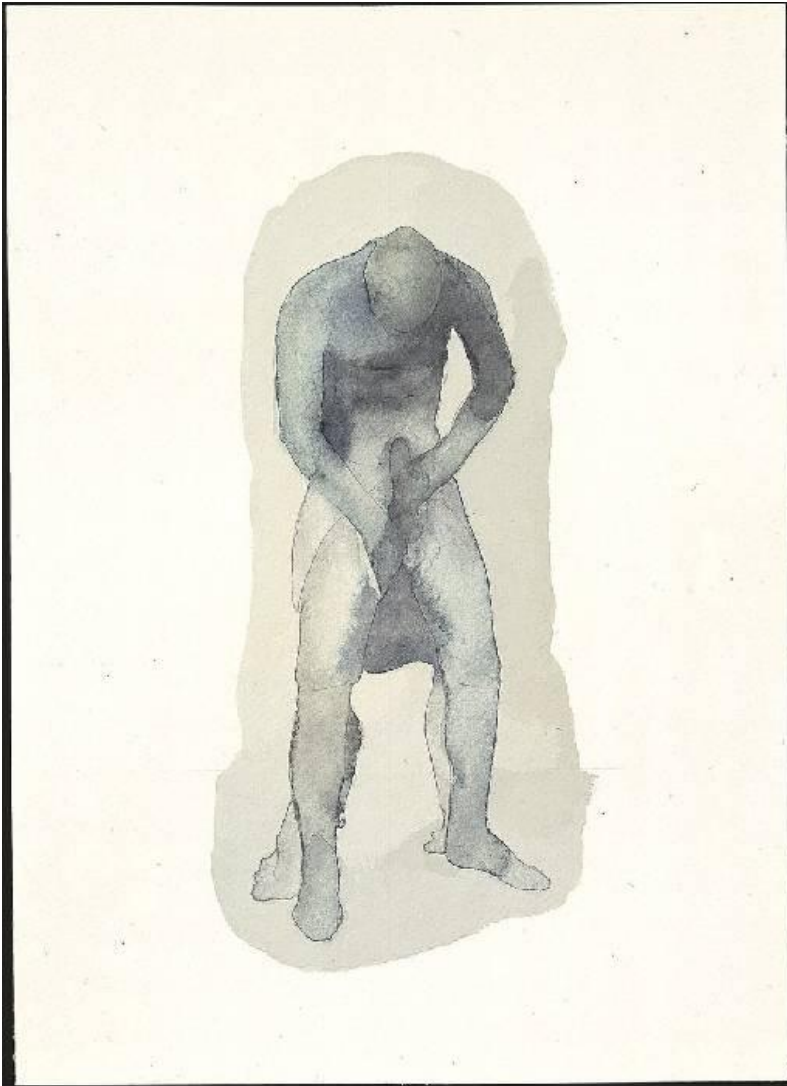


Figure 8.6: Monica Majoli, *Rubbermen* (#6 of 15), 2000-2001. Suite of 15: watercolor and gouache on paper in artist designated frame, 14 x 10".

Majoli importantly resists the urge to include a second body – a strategy that is not shared by her gay leathermen predecessors. Indeed, in David Sparrow’s photographic series for *Drummer* magazine another photograph of the previously mentioned bound figure, this one horizontal in format, is being tied up/down by a second, naked, man [fig. 8.8]. Their bodies overlap, creating an informal “Y”-shaped structure. Gone from this photograph is the ability to project a host or range of emotional feelings/states onto the

hanging body, as the relationship between the two depicted figures is the subject. Muscles-strained, the second unbound figure, is working hard – and his presence changes the very radical potentially to find a communal meaning in the solitary figure, a potentiality that Majoli full-heartedly embraces. Thus, the *Drummer* images ultimately subscribe more to the genre of a “how-to” manual, a drive towards mastering the techniques of leather, rather than the exploration of the experiences of leathersex.



Figure 8.8: Jack Fritscher, “Blest Be The Tie That Binds.” *Drummer*, no. 24, 1978. Photos by David Sparrow.

And then there is Majoli’s idea of surrogacy. For years now I have been fascinated by her work, as I think it interrogates and reaffirms my larger study. Just as Majoli realized that Peter’s stories came to be a surrogate for her own stories, so too have I come to view Majoli’s work as a surrogate for my own self (where academic work is intrinsically bound to feelings of self-worth and self-direction). I’ve taken the problems

and difficulties surrounding writing leather histories as a set of questions. These are life questions, much bigger than most academic studies, that I have yet, in my limited view, to fully comprehend. Majoli speaks about the bodies she represents as “envelopes,” places to put feelings, ideas.<sup>413</sup> Majoli’s work initially served as an envelope to put my ideas and feelings about AIDS and survivorship, about coming of age during the AIDS crisis. Now paintings like *Hanging Rubberman #2* also serve as envelopes for my feelings about community, history and sex.

In my first attempt to write this chapter, I insisted on defining a pre- and post-onset AIDS moment. This is a false division because all scholarship, all ontologies are, in a sense, post-onset. All the information I have found in my dissertation research bears the unmistakable and indexical marks of mass trauma – oral histories of infamous leathermen taken in the late 1990s are mini-monuments (like Majoli’s miniatures). Archives are repositories of gay and lesbian livelihoods and bar cultures. Old magazines collected and subsequently sold in stores like *The Magazine* on Polk Street in San Francisco come from the houses of dead leather women and men. The act of research itself has become a post-onset task. It’s enough to make you want to ride out towards the boundaries of accepted knowledge, only to find yourself unavoidably, perhaps permanently and deliciously hog-tied.

Majoli is currently working on a new series of oils – abstracted images of ex-lovers reflected in the black mirrors that line the walls of her bedroom [fig. 8.9] – and I am reminded that these things always double-back: work and life, fucking and friendship, self and other, the space of the bedroom and the space of the gallery, history and

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<sup>413</sup> Majoli, interview....

community. Majoli's work, and indeed much of the work I've discussed in the preceding chapters, can thicken our lives and invigorate how we look to community, history and sex as central concepts around which we continue to make meaning.

In doing so...

...we insist on being-with, even while we are at our most alone.



Figure 8.9: Monica Majoli, *Black Mirror (Jarrett)*, 2009. Oil on panel, 10-3/4 x 13-3/4".



## **Conclusion: This History, Thick History**

I began the process of realizing just what this dissertation could be after reading Jean-Luc Nancy's two texts, *The Inoperative Community* and *Being Singular Plural*. Nancy's move to complicate notions of both community (as un-becoming) and subjectivity (as being-with) spoke beautifully to the archives I was already beginning to access at the time. In many ways, the structure of this dissertation is an attempt to further Nancy's notions, through an enactment of a series of experiments in history writing. I want to make Nancy meaningful within a set of disciplinary realms where I feel most alive: queer studies, visual culture studies, art history.

But in the six years I've spent working on *Bound Together*, I have come to understand my own process of synthesizing both research and writing practices as an odd, or queer, kind of operation. This is a process which may very well remain my own - but as a teacher and member of multiple academic communities I also want to ensure that what I do here can be transferable as a methodology. In other words, one doesn't have to be interested in leather communities of the 1970s to get something out of this dissertation. I have consistently said in response to friends and family members who ask what my dissertation is about, that although it seems that my work is about 1970s leather communities, it is really about the relationships between sex, community, and history.

I learned from Jean-Luc Nancy how to view community and subjectivity expansively. I learned from Gayle Rubin how to site and politically speak about sex in similarly expansive terms.

But what of history?

I knew from the start that, although I wanted to learn as much as I could about 1970s leather communities, I didn't want to write an encyclopedic work, or lay claims to the sense of completeness that such studies assume. Simply put, I don't believe that such work does or ought to exist, in regards to gay and lesbian leather communities, or any other community for that matter. Those who have attempted to be encyclopedic, such as Robert Bienvenu, who wrote his dissertation on the *development* of leather communities, miss an important opportunity to understand and reflect on the operations and responsibilities of the historian concentrating on marginalized people. In the end, Bienvenu's history of leatherfolks looks and reads like any other conventionally-ordered history, unfolding in a roughly teleological frame.<sup>414</sup> This can be useful for those who wish to expand the list of appropriate subjects for capital-H history, hooking leather history into such larger tapestries. But this is not my wish; I hold dear the idea so succinctly put by Audre Lorde, "the master's tools will never dismantle the master's house."<sup>415</sup> The places where *Bound Together* insists on incoherency are, indeed, reflections of the numerous incoherencies that appear to be endemic to histories "forged in the crucibles of difference."<sup>416</sup> I tried to structure the dissertation so that, by the time one finished reading, one has a paradoxically fragmented and limited knowledge of leather history. That's a canary call to keep imagining, building and experimenting.

I also knew I wanted to challenge myself to write a dissertation which was something other than a collection of concerns, related as a series of detachable articles meant for publication. Instead, I wanted *Bound Together* to be meaningfully read as a

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<sup>414</sup> Bienvenu.

<sup>415</sup> Audre Lorde, "The Master's Tools Will Never Dismantle the Master's House," in *This Bridge Called My Back: Writings by Radical Women of Color*, eds. Cherrie Moraga and Gloria Anzaldúa (New York: Kitchen Table Press, 1983).

<sup>416</sup> Lorde, 98.

whole. I wanted to communicate affectively (and effectively) the frustration and excitement of encountering incomplete archives, of the anxiety of watching rarely-viewed films, of the deep and abiding love I have for the people I interfaced with.

And so I set some tasks for myself: write like an archive, write like you're still watching that film, write like you love. I saw this as a kind of performance-based approach to writing - and I found during my years working as a senior lecturer that as I taught the work of Adrian Piper, Marina Abramović, Coco Fusco, Lorraine O'Grady, Vaginal Davis, Yoko Ono, and ACT UP, I had strong feelings of yearning, empathy and identification with these varied artists' projects. In many ways, the tasks I set for myself are life-long tasks - performances of concern - I'll carry with me well after this text has been revised into its next form.

As stated above, the question of how to transfer and relate this kind of working method remains. Importantly, regardless of how I specifically came to write the preceding chapters, each was deeply informed by a prolonged engagement with the objects, people, documents, histories, visual sources, archives and writings I came into contact with. I wanted to write histories of being-with - distinct and related, unbecoming and becoming. Had I written about another topic, the content would be different and so would the shape of analysis.

Now, at the end of this phase of my work, a new term has come to exist alongside with being-with. I've started to call, silently at first, what I've done here as "thick history." While I've meditated for years on the import and influence of Nancy's being-with, "thick history" is a relatively new construction for me - and as such, I know it may

be a bit rickety. I am tentative in even typing it out. So let me attempt to map out, as best I can, the term's origins, as well as what I think it might mean.

Thick history is not a phrase of my sole and sudden imagining; the term has multiple origin points. The most direct, at least in my own research through-line, is a passing, yet poetic, turn of phrase used by Margot Weiss in describing the multi-layered ways contemporary BDSM communities are at once constituted by their social contexts and work towards expanding and enlivening these same contexts – something she calls “the thickness of social life on the ground.”<sup>417</sup> I found (and still find) her phrasing highly evocative, and began to interrogate its meanings.

Weiss, trained as an anthropologist, was giving a linguistic hat tip, no doubt, to one of cultural anthropology's most influential figures, Clifford Geertz. Borrowing from Gilbert Ryle, Geertz introduced the idea of “thick description” to an academic audience in his seminal 1973 book, *The Interpretation of Cultures*.<sup>418</sup> Thick description, at its most basic, indicates going beyond a flat conveyance of the activity or object under study (“thin description”), and instead considering an activity or object's variegated social-contextual meanings. Geertz's (also Ryle's) example is how an eye-twitch could be read as a wink, with all the meanings that winks might suggest: flirtatious, conspiratorial, parody. An anthropologist, Geertz argues, should be able to tell, because they are aware of context, the difference between an eye-spasm and an invitation. And yet Geertz

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<sup>417</sup> Weiss, 25. I ended my *GLQ* review of Weiss' book with that particular phrase. I found it to be her most apt and succinct description of her study. Andy Campbell, “Troubling Circuits,” rev. of *Techniques of Pleasure: BDSM and the Circuits of Sexuality*, Margot Weiss. *GLQ* 19, no. 3, 2013 [forthcoming].

<sup>418</sup> Clifford Geertz, *The Interpretation of Cultures* (New York: Basic Books, 1973). Part of the reason I want to concentrate on Geertz here is his relevancy within 1970s academic cultures, which were contemporaneous to 1970s gay and lesbian leather communities. It is important to state that I make no claims to an *overt* linkage, other than coincidence.

suggests there is no singular way of enacting thick description; he likens the task to that of the literary critic, multitudinous and personal. Indeed, when considering ethnography, one of the key tools of an anthropologist, Geertz is circumspect, elegantly remarking on the difficulty (and maybe impossibility) of the task at hand:

Doing ethnography is like trying to read (in the sense of ‘construct a reading of’) a manuscript – foreign, faded, full of ellipses, incoherencies, suspicious emendations, and tendentious commentaries, but written not in conventional graphs of sound but in transient examples of shaped behavior.<sup>419</sup>

Here Geertz likens his own disciplinary challenges to those faced by manuscript readers – literary critics and historians. The obstacles to making meaning are at once material (“faded”) and symbolic (“foreign”). How to build out an interpretation from such material? Geertz powerfully speaks out against tightly cohered meanings in interpretation, saying that “The force of our interpretations cannot rest, as they are now so often made to do, on the tightness with which they hold together, or the assurance with which they are argued.”<sup>420</sup> Such interpretations would reflect falsely upon the very real conditions of doing ethnography, reading manuscripts, and interpreting cultures. The answer, then, might be to embed the difficulty of making meaning within the very interpretation offered by the interpreter, and therefore the “ellipses, incoherencies [...] emendations, and [...] commentaries” become hallmarks of both a process *and* product.

In laying out the foundations of thick description, Geertz further remarks on the way anthropologists have developed a literature, a sort of academic archive. I think his

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<sup>419</sup> Geertz (1973), 10.

<sup>420</sup> Geertz (1973), 18.

particular take on how such a disciplinary literature accretes also aptly describes the internal structure of this dissertation's argument:

Rather than following a rising curve of cumulative findings, cultural analysis breaks up into a disconnected yet coherent sequence of bolder and bolder sorties. Studies do build on other studies, not in the sense that they take up where the others leave off, but in the sense that, better informed and better conceptualized, they plunge more deeply into the same things [...] A study is an advance if it is more incisive – whatever that may mean – than those that preceded it; but it less stands on their shoulders than, challenged and challenging, runs by their side.<sup>421</sup>

Because I want to see my work as an “advance” of sorts, I conceive of my own term, “thick history” as running by the side of Geertz’s “thick description”; they are related yet separate terms. Thick description and thick history are both highly informed by an intricate knowledge of social contexts. Importantly, however, they are different in that thick history marks the mode of conveyance, in *Bound Together* a dogged structural experimentalism, as equally informed by the same set of cultural contexts it purports to thickly describe. Thick history would therefore manifest differently with each author and each study. The tasks of research and writing are imaginative, remade anew each time. Thus it may look like there is no privileged point of view, or that there is no rhyme or reason to how thick history is enacted, but really thick history is highly-attuned to its content.

Thick history is meant to be generous and personal - as permission to relate to the academic world in a way that marks the form of analysis as content as well. As I'll explain in a bit, the connection between personal stories and placed histories is something that appears in Geertz's writings on thick description. In thinking about how to define my

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<sup>421</sup> Geertz (1973), 25.

own thick history I came up with a mini-manifesto, of sorts, which I excerpt below. It is a piece of writing I first used to think about what thick history might mean. Its sometimes contradictory, staccato statements echo some of the key rhetorical strategies I've used throughout this dissertation. Therefore it represents a kind of continuation of the structure *Bound Together*, and as terminology that comes out of this specifically placed work, its appearance reflects the specificity of my own project. The description you're about to read, although it contains salient elements that I think would define a thick history outside of this dissertation, is firmly nested inside of my own language - my own stakes - my own process:

Thick History: a kind of knowing and playful engagement with history; one that explores the depth and breadth of a particular subject/topic, without strictly demarcating its limits and/or boundaries. Thick history doubles back, allows for inconsistencies, hearsay, ellipses, and imagined narratives. At its best, thick history is generative, opening out more space for conflicting ideas, and serving as an ideal platform for alternative (read: experimental) models of writing. Eclectic though it may be, sometimes thick history privileges a subtle movement or a short phrase. Sometimes a broad expanse. Either way, thick history indexes the unlimited potential of working within and around archives, and is ultimately aware that it's also engaged in similar archival processes. Crucially, thick history also takes into account the anxieties and multiple positions of the writer(s). Its task, broadly stated, is to insist on the continued political importance of history writing. Thick history must therefore always be incompletely defined, begun here as one puny paragraph, remade by those who wish to amend, delete, contradict, take it up and use it anew. People should get cranky about thick history; they should disavow and throw it away, because loving it might be too suspicious. Thick history is useful, and for some, thick history is useless. And in whatever form thick history takes, it moves towards world-making (even as it addresses endings), agency (even as it seeks to describe oppression), and engagement (even as it discusses dissembling).

For a set of communities which have scarcely been written about in academia, and even more scarcely written about within the discipline of art history, the only way I knew how to approach this material was through the kind of writing you see above; an

enactment of the same kinds of experimental world-making I found so many examples of in the archives I tapped. In this writing, I notice, I take on the characteristics of the exuberant, fragmented, and piecemeal archives I have encountered. When I found contradictions in various archives I made the decision to let the contradictions stand, because I believed they spoke to larger challenges of researching sex cultures, and the current state of research in these arenas. Thick history has the capacity to convey many things at once: a nominal subject, the placed social contexts of both subject and researcher/writer, and the limits of disciplinary approaches used. Therefore, thick history must be *read with its thickness in mind*. In writing *Bound Together* I thought about my reader, and the kinds of experience I wanted my reader to have. In my third chapter on the color yellow, I make an argument through the process of adjacent placement. In making my own iconographic, archival category - yellow - I found new ways of connecting embodied sex practices, visual representations, and experience for myself. A reader, likewise, has to come to terms with a non-linear argument - my hope is that in this process a reader is an equal arbiter of meaning. In my fifth chapter, I did something similar through engaging with, and writing, multiple descriptions of *L.A. Plays Itself*. My descriptions are now fodder for a reader to make sense of, and unlike the existing descriptions of Halsted's film I worked from, I insist on the vulnerabilities of my descriptions in that I make my anxieties and desires overly, embarrassingly, clear. Interfacing - interpersonal contact - is the primary architecture of my seventh chapter, which excerpts at length, Viola Johnson's intimate exchanges with me and the patrons of her library. A sense of Viola Johnson as a person is put into contact with a sense of leather history beyond Johnson's direct experiences - as related through her pin sash. Just as Johnson packs up her library, moving around to various events, my analysis moves across the expanse of her pin sash.



The smaller, interceding chapters on contemporary artists and their projects are attuned multiply to the individual terms of each artist's work and to their larger placement within the dissertation. These chapters allow me to think through the ways that histories continue to accrue meaning through a reuse and reformatting of visual works and documents from the 1970s. Christian Holstad uses history to challenge contemporary queer consumerist cultures and temporalities, while Monica Majoli maneuvers elegantly between memorializing and documenting the affective bonds she creates with herself and others. AK Burns and AL Steiner insist on the radical possibilities of multiple kinds of sex - playful, orgasmic, tender - and inspire me to aggregate differences instead of ameliorate them. *Community Action Center's* multiple and politically competing lineages (radical feminist, lesbian separatist, gay leather) are equally privileged. Finally, Dean Sameshima's unconnected dots invoke me to critically evaluate my own ordering, helping me to understand incompleteness as a choice. A reader who accounts for these various uses of leather visual cultures hopefully comes to an understanding of the continued political potency of the items and ideologies of 1970s leather communities. I ask that we be-with history.

My dissertation moved quickly beyond the struggle or need to prove myself to my immediate committee as a worthy colleague and peer. I first needed to prove myself to my material, and adequately represent its complexity and challenges. I chose to take a more expansive view, and I am now trying to shape my scholarship in a way I would like to see riffed by others, important not just for the subject of *Bound Together*, but also for how it goes about the business of scholarship. As such, this is a document which strongly represents my own move towards world-making, agency and engagement.

The terminology of “thickness” might come from cultural anthropology, but I’ve found a visual imagining of thick history contemporary to the 1970s, in an advertisement for the Folsom St. Barracks.



Figure 9.1: Bill Tellman, “FFA Night at Folsom St. Barracks”, c. 1972.

In 1972, Tellman drew an advertisement for the San Francisco hotel/bathhouse/bar, the Folsom St. Barracks [fig. 9.1]. Tellman’s drawing advertises an

FFA night at the Barracks; the acronym standing for an affinity group that most commonly expanded out to Fist Fuckers of America, but FFA-ers also developed clever and covert extrapolations of the acronym such as Fall Festival Association. Tellman depicts a left fist with its index finger pointed upwards. Tattooed on the knuckles of the fist is the group acronym “FFA,” clearly aligning the hand with the group and the activity of fist-fucking. A series of dotted lines and dates are drawn along the circumference of the finger and wrist. The first, marked 1969, stops at the base of the index finger; the second and third, marked 1970 and 1971 respectively, circumscribe the space below the fist, incrementally creeping down the forearm. The intimation is that fist-fucking was “invented” in 1970, and furthermore, as the decade wore on the act became more extreme, deeper. Indeed I repeat here that philosopher Michel Foucault, known as a player in the leather bars of San Francisco, wanly remarked that fisting was “our century's only brand-new contribution to the sexual armamentarium.”<sup>422</sup> Whether or not this is strictly true, Tellman’s drawing suggests that 1970s leather communities were already viewing themselves historically.

Yet Tellman’s drawing is also somewhat confusing, as the artist has drawn the index finger pointed up *and* knuckled-down in the same image – there are, in effect, six fingers on this hand. Perhaps the drawing indicates multiple temporalities – a hand in two different positions over time; the “newer” fist overlaps the extended figure, perhaps indicating, through formal means, its closer relationship to the calendar year 1972. But this overlaying of hand positions – the multiplicity of fingers – might suggest a shorter temporal frame. The finger/fist combination also intimates the time and work it takes to insert a fist into an ass, as an asshole has to gradually be opened-up finger-by-finger until

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<sup>422</sup> Halperin, 92.

it is pliable enough to take an entire fist. Thus we might imagine a temporality that is more aligned with the work of the activity of fisting. In leaving the composite hand positions unresolved, Tellman opens out his six-fingered hand to multiple interpretations.

Tellman also includes the abstract representation of a particular community, the emblem of the Fist Fuckers of America, one of the pieces of regalia and symbology referred to as “club colors” within leather communities. Two figures, each composed of an open dot for a head, and two abutting half-circles for a body, are placed in diagonal alignment. The bottom figure’s right “arm” extends to meet (and is indeed incorporated into) the space between the top figure’s “legs.” The FFA emblem economically communicates many more things about fist-fucking. The first is that fist-fucking is a relational, even hierarchical, activity. Fisting is often realized as a dyadic relationship between “top” and “bottom,” loosely correlated with “penetrator” and “penetrated” respectively. Yet, the top/fister in the FFA emblem is actually spatially below the bottom/fistee. This may suggest a greater interplay between the roles of top and bottom, and a loosening of such dyadic representations. Second, in rendering the bodies of these figures as open blocks, and in connecting the interior spaces of the bodies, Tellman also intimates that fistfucking has the potential to unify two disparate bodies - that type of being-with that Nancy so specifically works against. And so the FFA symbol communicates something about the *experience* of fist-fucking, of embodying consensual and shifting power dynamics, and of feeling intimately connected.

Finally, even the text in Tellman’s drawing reinforces the act of fisting, as the closed spaces of letters (such as an “A” or lower-case “g”) are roundly filled in with

black ink, excepting the shape-in-negative of a five-pointed star. This abstract patterning cartoonishly approximates the pucker of an asshole.

By placing all of these elements within the same frame, Tellman represents, indeed draws, a thick history, in that he incorporates a historiographic view of a particular activity alongside its multivalent temporal embodiments. Tellman's advertisement is special to me in that it is one of the few drawings which represent an imagining of thick history through strictly visual means. Mostly, the thick histories in this dissertation are the result of the *contemporary processes of research and writing about the 1970s*, seemingly extrinsic to, and temporally removed from that time. Tellman's drawing is a thick history contemporary to the 1970s.

About fifteen years before Tellman drew his six-fingered fist, Clifford Geertz began developing his notion of thick description when he set off to Bali in 1958 to do fieldwork. Eventually he produced an article from this trip, entitled "Deep Play: Notes on the Balinese Cockfight," first published in 1972 in the journal *Daedalus* and subsequently included in *The Interpretation of Cultures*, begins with a first person narrative account of the author and his wife arriving, "malarial and diffident," to a Balinese village.<sup>423</sup> Although authorized by the Balinese government through their "Distinguished Visitor" status, the Geertzes were not at all imbricated in village life. Indeed, Geertz describes his presence in the village to a "gust of wind"... inconsequential, ignorable, a practical nonentity.<sup>424</sup> All this changes dramatically when Geertz and his wife attend a cockfight in the public square. Because of the illegality of cockfights, Javanese (then in control of

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<sup>423</sup> Clifford Geertz, "Deep Play: Notes on the Balinese Cockfight," *Myth, Symbol and Culture*. Spec. issue of *Daedalus* 101, no. 2 (Winter 1972): 1.

<sup>424</sup> Geertz (1972), 2.

Bali) vice police raid the event. Instead of relying on their foreign privilege, the Geertzes opt to run and hide with the rest of the villagers. And it is through hiding, which Geertz calls a productive “cowardice,” that their relationship with the village shifts radically. “The next morning,” Geertz says, “the village was a completely different world for us [...] The whole village opened up to us, probably more than it ever would have otherwise...”<sup>425</sup>

Although Geertz’s ultimate goal in his essay is to proffer a thick description of the cockfight as a “shaped behavior” – relying on Jeremy Bentham’s ideation of “deep play” – he begins with a personal history, another kind of shaped behavior. Geertz provides a historical frame for his ethnography, an informal anecdote whereby a reader comes to understand how exactly his ethnography was made, elucidating the conditions and anxieties that informed the work.

My story is not so interesting. I, too, arrived to gay and lesbian leather communities of the 1970s as an outsider; I was removed generationally and in how I self-identified at the time. But, unlike the Geertzes, who were *personae non gratae*, I was lucky to be welcomed immediately with open arms - Viola Johnson’s arms to be specific. My consistent worry was how I would do justice to the immense, vibrant, and largely unacknowledged, creative endeavors of gay and lesbian leather communities. It seemed, and continues to seem, an impossible responsibility. This question gnawed at me, paralyzing me. I don’t know exactly when that changed - I’ve tried to pinpoint a particular moment, but without success. What I know is this: sometime between then and now, I came to understand, and really embody, the politics of *Bound Together*.

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<sup>425</sup> Geertz (1972), 4.

Primarily, it is a politics of imagination.

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## Vita

Andrew “Andy” Raymond Campbell was born in Austin, Texas in 1982. After attending Oberlin College, where he obtained his undergraduate degree in Art History, Gender and Women’s Studies and Theater, Andy moved back to Texas to pursue his graduate studies at UT-Austin. His Master’s degree was awarded after he completed his thesis on queer film fandom, Parker Tyler, and the film version of *Myra Breckinridge* (1970). While in Austin, Andy served as a curator for a number of contemporary art exhibitions, and contributed writings to a variety of local, regional, national and international art publications. Additionally, Andy maintained activist affiliations with Queerbomb!, the Femme Mafia, and donates time and service to a host of queer organizations. Currently, Andy is a Senior Lecturer in Art History at Texas State University in San Marcos, Texas. There he teaches courses on feminism, video activist art and the HIV/AIDS pandemic, graphic novels, bad taste, contemporary art, queer studies, and histories of photography. He is a DJ and pug owner.

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